A PARAHUMANS ZINE

2020

A Foreword, by TheSleepingKnight

What is a superhero?

If you look at a dictionary, it says that a superhero is a benevolent fictional character with superhuman powers. And while that is correct in the factual, generic way all dictionary definitions are, I think that the truth is far greater than that.

When I was a child, I would dream about being a hero. Saving everyone, flying from rooftop to rooftop, catching falling civilians, lifting planes. I think nearly everyone has fantasized about it at some point.

And then reality comes in, and it knocks you on your ass, and it laughs at you for dreaming such impossible things. "What a child!" It exclaims. "Superheroes aren't real. You can't save anyone." And it is both right and wrong. Superheroes aren't real. There are no capes, there are no vials, there are no bright flashes of color soaring through a lonely sky.

But we can save someone.

Worm is a story about fundamentally damaged people. Powers are borne from the worst days of their lives, the main character routinely justifies torture and war crimes, the work as a whole ends with humanity having to evacuate the planet.

And despite all of that, Worm managed to awaken something in me that had been dead for years: my love of superheroes. Since discovering it, I've thrown myself head-first into the genre, and it's been a wonder, remembering how much I love this strange, quirky sub-area of fiction. Worm saved me from the mediocrity of a life without dreams of a better world.

This zine wasn't my creation, but it has become my child: a love letter to this world that I have embraced so fully, and others have as well. There are tens of thousands of fanfics that focus on Taylor, but I and others believe that we don't give enough credit to the vast setting beyond her. There are countless stories waiting to be told, out there.

This zine can now sit proudly as one of them.

I would like to thank each and every contributor for the sweat, blood and tears they poured into every word, every line, every piece. I would like to thank each and every contributor for every word we exchanged during the zine's creation- for every meme (snoosy), shitpost (haha aster) and just all of their love of this world.

And above all else, I would like to thank Earthzayin, nil, my co-moderator and good friend, for inviting me to be a part of this. It gave me a reason to press on in the face of a frightening world.

And to all you readers....

Let me tell you a story.

CONTRIBUTORS

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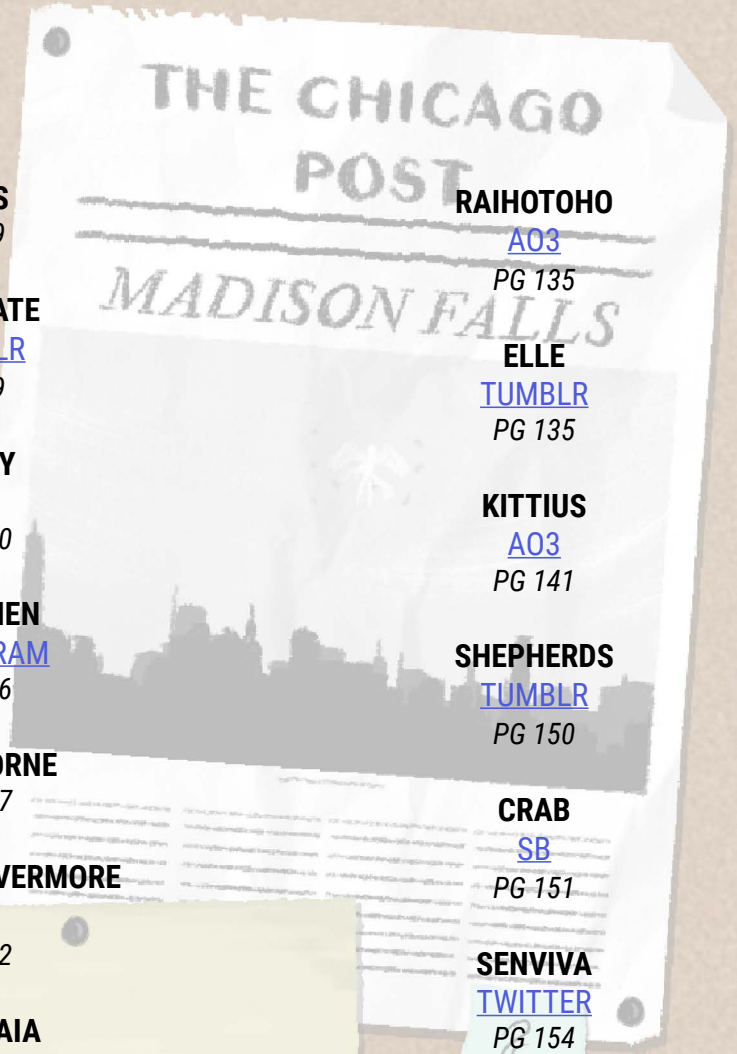

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Tell me about the golden age, someone will ask, curled up under their blankets, staring at a new sky, the stars strangers.

It starts with a dream, and it dies like one, will come the answer, from a woman who has watched a world burn.

Earth Bet stares at its future and were it able, it would smile. It looks like a demented spiderweb, threads stretching in dimensions untold. Sometimes, Bet thinks it is being spoiled for choice. Other times, it thinks that there are far too many threads for it to ever be fair. Perhaps this is a test by some other power, perhaps this is merely the way of the universe. In the end, it matters not. All that matters is the path that looks the most— oh. Oh, that is *interesting.*

The world decides to move a man from the east to the midwest; a woman from the south to the north east. It drives them with whispers and broken roads and last-minute flight plans, it spurs them on with dreams and frights, until at last they meet in a bar and then in a hotel, and things go from there. Bet pokes and prods and pulls at their minds until they land somewhere between Ohio and Michigan. The couple is tumultuous and they're not particularly decent people, but that's entirely irrelevant.

No, what matters are the children that they may or may not have. What matters is that the children blast open the doorways to so many possible futures that it seems almost unbelievable. It can't resist. But in order for it to work, Bet needs something impossible.

So Earth Bet lies down and creates a dream. It dreams a dream that is chiefly among humanity's fantasies. It is a dream that is the most childish and far-fetched of all: it dreams of a good man.

Only months later in a dingy hospital room, this dream will take form and flesh, and it is given a name.

Andrew Hawke.

The shape of his future almost gleams in the darkness of the galaxy.

The world holds its breath and turns.

Death will come slowly for Andrew Hawke.

And the doctor pronounces his fate with a face all grim, age having carved itself into a greying mountain. And his wife holds him close but he can feel no warmth. And the light pouring in from the afternoon sun seems paltry and weak, a poor imitation of a brilliant day. Bet delights in contrasting reality with fiction: a proper tale would demand rain, a show of thunder and lighting, outer chaos to reflect inner turmoil. Instead, it gives him an overcast haze, off-white tiles, aquamarine curtains. It gives him flickering LED lights in the ceiling, and a tv in the corner, muttering static and an incorrect weather forecast.

This is where he is told he has five short years, and he hates it. It is no place to be told you are going to die. It is grimy, it is saccharine, it is...fake. A lie, a horrible lie. This cannot be his life, no — his life was supposed to be different. He is supposed to be more than is. He is supposed to live with Cecily until they are old and grey, he is supposed to see his sister defeat her own illness, he is supposed to watch his nieces and nephews grow up. Supposed to, supposed to. A meaningless phrase, when confronted with the truth. There is no*supposed to*,nor is there *should have* or *could be.* There is only *Is* and *Isn't.* And what *is*...is cancer.

Cancer. A strange word, a small word. Six little letters for such an enormous thing. A malignant growth, life bringing about death. In the throes of shock, it is almost poetic. Faced with the certainty of death, Andrew Hawke makes a choice.

He chooses to smile, and his smile stretches out, like a ripple in a pond, through time.

The world grins and turns forwards.

In the days that come, Andrew Hawke will find himself saying *yes,* more. *Yes,* he would like to meet for drinks and catch up. *Yes,* he would like to go to the ball game. *Yes,* he would like to go on a cruise. Yes. What a wonderful word it is, door-opener and relationship-restarter. He meets old friends, attends events, makes plans for outings he would never have considered before. He plots his future with aplomb. It is said that the brightest stars burn out the fastest, but perhaps it is better to say that those who burn out faster burn all the brighter for it. Perhaps the shortest dreams choose to be brilliant, to make up for lost time.

However, he finds that the word *No,* ever the enemy of engagement, has become far harder to utter and have it stick.

"No, Cecily," he says, for what must be the thirty-third time. "I don't want to." "Andrew."

His wife is aware of the rare breed of her husband, and she will not let him go without a fight. And when she fights, she fights with dirt under her nails and fires within her eyes— she's not above bringing brass knuckles to brawl. "Please. At least consider it. For my sake, if not yours."

"Cecily— I don't want to spend the last of it tied to a bed, waiting for it to be over."

"Andrew, *please* at least hear me out," she demands, and Bet could almost admire her defiance,

if it wasn't so sad. Cecily Smith, ever the champion for lost causes. (As a child, she would try to save the little ants and pill bugs that crawled into her home, carefully scooping them into her little star-jars and delivering them outside. She never knew that there were spiders waiting in the bushes outside. She never knew that her husband was born only for a singular moment in time.) "I don't *want* to, Cecily. Isn't that enough for you?"

"I want more time with my *husband.*" There's a dangerous, broken edge to her words, sharp syllables buzzing on the skin of her teeth, and for a moment the world considers a different future. Perhaps, perhaps. As always, time is a knotted nightmare that can never quite be untangled, and Bet's course has already been set.

"I'm right here," he offers. "We can spend time together right now, Cecily. Right now is… is all we have." He swallows. "I— I can't imagine how hard this is for you. And I *understand,* I more than understand— I'm afraid, too. Afraid of— of dying." Even now, the words still ring hollow to him. Even as he persists he falters, inevitably crushing him as surely as the sky bore down on Atlas's shoulders, grinding his impossible optimism and creating coarse edges around his soul.

"Nothing is going to change that now."

"So… you're giving up, then?" She sits down next to him on the bed. "No raging against the dying of the light? Not even going to try?" A shuddering breath. "Not even for me?"

Her voice, loud enough to move mountains, is so small it wraps itself around his heart and *squeezes*. He closes the distance, and they embrace. And even after years, Andrew still marvels with how perfectly his body slots into place against hers— like pieces of a puzzle, or perhaps magnets, inexorably drawn to each other.

(Bet watches, enraptured. It has seen love before, but never quite like this, and it knows it never quite will again. This is how a dream loves — it loves with all it has.)

"I want to live." He swallows, struggling for words. "I want to *live,* Cecily. With you, as fully as I can. The treatment…I won't spend my last years in pain just to hold on a little while longer, confined to a couch or a bed. I *won't.* I'd rather be here a little shorter but enjoy my time then be forced to go on, tired and bitter. Don't do that to me."

"I don't want to lose you." And then the waterworks really come, and the two of them might as well be the only things that exist, in this small bedroom, midnight keeping out all other things.

"I feel like I already have. You're slipping through my fingers and no matter how much I try to hold on I just lose more of you."

"I'm right here," he whispers. "I'm not gone yet. We've— we've had so much taken from us already. Don't let this thing take any more."

They talk long into the night.

The world sighs and turns.

Andrew Hawke will die in a few months or so, and as such, he is going on a cruise. Grace is joining him, and her name has never been more fitting or more ironic. She's dying, too, and she's taken to it like a fish to water — and to drink. Andrew Hawke hasn't smelled a single breath of hers that didn't taste like spirits. She's drowning herself in every sense of the word. Drowning in her misery until she comes out the other side smiling, drowning her mind until she can't feel the fear or despair anymore.

We can make it a sibling thing, she'd offered with a bottle already in hand, downing her medicine as if it cured anything at all, *two dead Hawkes walking.*

The world shifts and it considers the many ways in which Grace could meet her end, and none of them are quite as interesting (quite as satisfactory) then having her outlive her brother. So it continues to shift people and places, nudge buildings here and there, whisper into not-quite listening ears, to ensure that she never finds pills nor rope. Grace Lands is going to live, and that will— oh.

Oh, that is *fascinating.*

(Brockton, a little nothing city on the edge of the coast without a scrap of history or pride; its future has swollen and grown into a woven monster, threads skittering into the dark.)

"You know," Grace says one night, curled up on her bed, still unused to sleeping above an ocean, "I thought about having kids."

"Yeah?" Andrew asks.

"Yeah." She sighs. "Michael wasn't big on the idea either. We thought about adopting, but we just...never got around to it. I definitely didn't want to have my own. No more kids deserve to get tangled up with the Hawke family drama."

"...you're still angry?" he asks. She turns, fury in her eyes. So, *yes* then. He couldn't blame her. Their parents… Well.

There was a reason he hadn't called them yet.

(Perhaps the parents could have been handled differently, but then Andrew would not have been so gentle, and his sister would not have been so honest, and so it is fine. But it is a reminder that when you push people too much they tend to get a bit...shattered. Driving the parents so far and

so long had worn out the humans, like butter scraped over too much bread. They were thin and wiry and *mean,* minds gone quiet from phantom screams.)

"Of course I'm still angry," she mutters. "I'm just too tired to get into it right now. I don't need it. Or them. And besides— maybe dying will get them to call us. What do you think?" She gives a weak chuckle, bitterness dripping off her tongue like wine running down the side of her glass. It's a jagged, coarse thing, her laughter. Andrew wonders when that happened. She used to sound so bright. What has the world done to his sister? (So much, and not nearly enough.) "I think we'll get it just before we croak. Maybe they'll show up on our deathbeds, just to be extra. That's *so* them."

"You're awful adjusted to the idea of dying," Andrew notes. "Every other joke is about it."

"Does it make you uncomfortable, Andy?"

"Don't call me Andy."

"Sure thing, Andy."

"Grace, I'm trying to have a conversation with

you." "You certainly are."

"Do you not want to talk about it? About— dying? Aren't you scared?" He finds himself crying again, throat squeezing and dry. "I'm so scared, Grace. I came with you to get away from it but it just followed me here."

"Oh, Andrew." She sighs, drifting off to sleep. "You haven't learned? Dying is the one thing you get to look forward to. Might as well learn to like it." He falls asleep himself not long after.

The world laughs and turns.

At last (at *last*) the day has arrived.

At first, it is a day the same as any other on the open ocean, clear blue above and opaque navy below, and the wind is fair. At first, those who have gathered on the deck that early believe the brilliant glow on the distant horizon is the golden sun, making its slow, inexorable march across the sky. And then, slowly, they realize. Watches are checked, the ocean and the sky are stared at. And then all at once, they arrive at the conclusion, as the true star rises in the west, turning the ocean crimson.

That isn't the sun.

And then there is panic, and they scramble to find staff, who scramble to find managers, who scramble to find a captain; an old man, a beard like snow and a mind like mountain springs, it is easy for Bet to whisper in his ear and urge him towards that golden glow.

What happens next *echoes* throughout history like a gunshot and screams forwards like a bullet, the timeline exploding into uncountable permutations the moment ***Scion*** (it can hear his name, echoed from the future, and the sound of it sends all of the threads humming with potential) touches Andrew Hawke's hand. For a moment all Bet can see are the brilliant shards dancing around it like a hall of mirrors transformed into a ballroom, and it *rocks* with delight. Andrew Hawke is silent for the rest of the trip, man confronted with myth, dream confronted with designer, and when at last his silence falls, he becomes a prophet. The world shouts and turns.

And so it is said that death had released Andrew Hawke. And his doctor stutters this out with a face that is broken gravel, and his entire body seems flush with an inner warmth, and the rain lightly sliding off the window could have been fire and he wouldn't have noticed. He is going to *live,* and he knows why, he knows who has given him this miracle. The doctors press for details, they press for information— word has spread, and he had *talked* to reporters after, a decision he regrets more and more.

"I need to go," he tells them, earnestly pleading. The staff immediately jump in with reasons why he needs to stay, and he has to resist the urge to throw up when they say *tests*, and his fear is not just his own.

"There's so much we could learn," the doctor says eagerly, and there's a lurking darkness inside the aging man's voice; it sends an unnamable emotion creeping into Hawke's consciousness, an instinct without a label that shouts into his mind: *Get out now.* (Bet sees syringes, Bet sees scalpels, and so Bet urges him out of that hospital as fast as it can; it needs him in the field.) He goes home to Cecily and there are once more tears and embraces, but this is a happy occurrence, for they now see nothing but the life they should have had. Bet laughs, and then prods at Hawke once more, creeping into his marital bed, whispering a sweet nothing into his ear: *You were supposed to die, and he saved you. What are you going to do with that?*

Andrew Hawke is a dream: He is a good man, and so he arrives at his answer.

*I have to save everyone else.*And in his tossing and turning that night, in his dreaming, he arrives at a word that blasts through Bet's consciousness like an air raid siren:

Vikare.

The world shivers and turns.

This is Vikare, the first of them all: He is righteous. He is gentleness and light, he is a graceful avenger. Dressed in beautiful bronze, helm adorned with wings and clothed in white, he takes to an uncrowded sky with a confidence that belies his fears. He is the man who swoops down on invisible wings to rescue children from trees, men from monsters, women from men. And they all look at him with some strange mix of awe and disbelief, but he finds that he doesn't mind their apprehension or their distrust: all that matters is that he is helping. And if that means he does not fly quite as high as he could, then that is all right.

And every night, he goes home to Cecily Smith, and he tells her *I would stop, if you asked me.* And Cecily Smith, armorer of humanity's newest demigod, laughs and says *no, you wouldn't. And I won't, because I know you, and it would hurt you too much to not help. I married you for your heart, Andrew. I won't ask you to tear it out for me. Besides, you love it.*

And so it is, and it is true: he loves it. He loves it, because he is a dream, he is a good man, and his heart sings for every imperfect stranger he rescues from any ill-fate. In the years that pass, they do not all at once trust him, they do not all at once love him — but slowly, slowly. And he has already heard the whispers of a plan, of more men and women like him, and he cannot wait to meet them, to fly with them, to fight with them. For a moment, as he drifts home and looks to the horizon, he can see a new age for humanity, and it gleams a brilliant gold.

And so it is until one day, one date: July 1st, 1989. There is a riot over a game happening: someone has taken a dive, someone has cheated, there are a thousand accusations and none of them are true. There is blood and chaos, people throwing themselves at each other with wild abandon, and Bet laughs to itself as it reminds them that all they *ever need* is an excuse.

And then a dream comes along.

And he tries to make them stop, floating down like an angel from on high, and he begs them to lay down their fists and still their anger: he preaches peace, and kindness. In return he is called *freak,* he is called *arrogant,* he is called *false.* And so in a desperate act, he sinks down to earth. And for just a moment, he has them all listening.

Here I am, he says, smiling. *I know this get-up makes me look a bit silly, but underneath it all— despite it all, I'm still one of you. Yes, I can fly. Yes, I can do things long-since thought impossible. But so can all of you, I'm sure. We are, all of us, impossibilities: against the odds we've made it to today. And I know that you're angry, and I know that you want someone to blame, but please, don't do this. Nothing good will come of this. We can be better. We can choose to be more than animals, striking at each other out of fear and hate. We can—*

Death comes quickly for Andrew Hawke.

No one knows exactly who hit him, and no one ever will. The name of Vikare's killer is annulled from history by violence and forgetfulness. But the sound of metal crashing into an unprotected skull, that is unforgettable; the noise of it screams through time, the dull *thunk* and *crack* of a bat fracturing bone locking the future on a collision course.

Andrew Hawke was a dream: he was a good man. And so he dies cursing nothing.

Tell me about the golden age.

It was a dream. We all woke up.

You are now a verified meatbag.

You will now be redirected to the RULES post. There is a timer to ensure you have read everything before posting.

...

The Rules

An5y (R.I.P.) [Computer Programs]

Jul. 13 2003

Welcome to The TinkTank! ⋆3 39

This site is designed to be a haven for heroic and rogue Tinkers to discuss their craft, refine it, and just as a place to chat with like-minded people. However, while we do take necessary precautions, there are a few rules we would like you to follow to enhance the security features.

1. You do not talk about The TinkTank. Seriously, we're Tinkers - blueprints for WMDs are everyday things. We cannot let villainous Tinkers get ahold of them.
2. A follow-up from the previous rule: do not invite Tinkers willy-nilly. You might have known them since childhood, but we certainly don't. They might even be under Master influences. You can nominate for them to receive an invite, but *that's it.*
3. After the Daedalus Incident, please refrain from texting on TTT while flying.
4. Never, ever, mention *them*, especially the *third one*, by name or any of their common titles. There is an auto-filter that will remove the words if you do. If you absolutely must, please be as roundabout in their description as possible.
   - Addendum 4a: Tinkertech discussions on dimensional travel and alternate universes are banned.
   - Addendum 4b: Tinkertech discussions on biospheres, interplanetary or otherwise, are banned.
   - Addendum 4c: Tinkertech discussions on large-scale illusions and holograms are banned.
   - Addendum 4d: Tinkertech discussions on power nullification or reduction are banned.
5. In the event you will be advertising your Tinkertech on the Market Forum, please refer to the various Rules and Regulations that you may be subject to in your region of the world. Please contact the moderators for additional support.
6. Please be courteous to your fellows and don't forget basic decency. Debate and argument is fine, harassment is not.

Further in-detail rules are here. It includes a lot of common-sense stuff which I sincerely hope won't have to be spelled out to you. Go through it if you're still not sure.

Last edited by Dragon on Dec. 29 2009

Tinkertech Alloys

Electrum (Canberra Heat) [Alloys]

Dec. 15 2009

☆ 7

As you can already tell, I am a Tinker specializing in alloys. To list a few examples of what I can make: superconductor alloys, skeletal implants, chemical catalysts, shock-resistant Brute alloys, thermal resistance, electrical resistance, so on. As you can see, alloys don't necessarily have to be metallic in nature. You can just ask…

READ MORE

Propulsion systems

Red Glare (Protectorate) [Rockets]

Nov. 8 2009

☆ 12

Hey, y'all! I am selling rockets, missiles, whatever you want that flies through the air. The lower-end is generally disposable and single-use, and the high end stuff can be used as a hypersonic DHL to ferry stuff around and is reusable. Some can travel between continents. None of them go sub-orbital by intentional design…

READ MORE

Molecular Cloning Device

e^- (Bundespolizei) [General Chemistry]

Oct. 29 2009

☆1 6

I have recently had success in building a molecular cloning device. We all know how tricky it can be to find the composition of unknown substances, fuels, or materials for forensic purposes. This device can help you with that, provided you have a sample. It will reliably catalog and clone molecules up to 120kDa in size…

READ MORE

Portable Nuclear Power Plants

Sep. 11 2009

Queen of Cups (The Suits) [Nuclear Power]

⋆2
2

Are you using your sad, gloopy lithium-ion batteries? Are you frustrated because your extension cord won't let you reach the villain you want to catch? Well, be sad and frustrated no more! I, Queen of Cups, will grant you salvation in the form of portable nuclear power plants! They will keep your power…

READ MORE

India announces construction of largest to-date solar facility in the world

Enigma (Independent) [Encryption] ☆ 11
Mar. 12 2010

Tl;dr India has finalized plans for the largest solar facility in the world to date, replacing original plans for an additional four coal-powered plants. They have taken out a $3bn US loan from the World Bank to accomplish this. They plan to construct the facility in 50,000-hectare space in the sunny and arid region of Rajasthan in North India, estimated to produce over 280GWh per annum and possibly more with Tinker intervention. Link here.

Foreman (Protectorate) [Stationary Buildings] ☆ 3
Mar. 12 2010

Good on them. They saw this coming and prepped for it, unlike the idiots in the States. Oil prices have gone way up since Anchorage last year, so India made a good call reducing their fossil fuel dependency.

Big Rig (Toybox) [Construction Drones] ☆ 13
Mar. 12 2010

OP could've linked BBC or NYT and chose that garbage blog.

Daedalus (Protectorate) [Flight Packs] (DUNCE!) ☆ 11
Mar. 12 2010

@Big_Rig seriously, those pop up ads made it through my tinkertech adblock

Minuteman (Independent) [Optics] ☆ 2
Mar. 12 2010

@Foreman America barely exports oil anymore. Im pretty sure whatever oil fields were affected in Alaska wont make much of a difference on the world price.

Blackbird

Online Now

Sooo

Do you wanna see my thing

...please elaborate

You know

The thing i used your alloys to build? Do you wanna see it?

Oh right

I mean if you're fine with it, then sure let me see

Ok! Glad to hear that because I'm flying towards you right now.
You're stationed in Canberra, AUS right?

Let anyone important know I'm coming lol

Wait what do yo umean you're coming

Callie???

Hold up I need an explanation for this I can't just let people stop by especially if they're from a different country

I'm in the air! I'll text you back once I'm safe on the ground.
This is an automated message to prevent violation of Rule 3 of TTT.

Callie what the fuck |

AITA for lightly bumping into a pedestrian on my way to beat the shit out of Jack Slash when he punted a baby?

Feb. 11 2011

`Freezer Burn (Independent) [Flash-Freeze]`

☆ 26

So I (33M) saw Jack Slash (666M) punting a baby (-40F) so I ran to arrest him. However, in my haste to capture him, I lightly brushed against a civilian (1F) and forgot to apologize to them… READ MORE

Never playing a game with Flytrap as GM ever again

Feb. 10 2011

`Surge (Wards) [Agility Enhancement]`

☆ 39

He replaced the d20 with a coin that says 20 on one side and 1 on the other

how do you deal with the guy thats UTTERLY CLUELESS

Feb. 10 2011

`Blackbird (High-Speed Transport)`

☆ 17

so i recently won two bad canary tickets in a chairty raffle. there's this one guy that i want to take but the thing is, i swear he's denser than a neutron star sometimes. Like i swear to god he's reading this thread right now but wont realize im talking about him. i need some more perspective folks from T3 to teach me how im supposed to deal with a dude like that.

My son ended up triggering

Feb. 9 2011

`Audiatorix [Rogue] (Soundwave Manipulation)`

☆ 22

I realize it's a second-gen and not as bad but that doesn't make it good. He told me he was under a lot of stress from trying to live up to *my* expectations. Me. I'm not even a hero. I don't know how to tell him that I'm already proud of him. He's a depressed teenager and I'm scared he won't believe me. I really need some advice.

Blackbird

Online Now

Guess who got two Bad Canary tickets and doesn't have anyone to enjoy them with :(

Gee, let me think

Is it... you?

Wow i never thought you'd guess

I was gonna go with a friend but she got sick so now i need to find someone who wants to come with me

Do you like Bad Canary??

I don't even know who that is

Unbelievable. I'm shook

That's it. I'm taking you with me so you can be enlightened

Um

You're not going to just drag me away again, are you? I got a warning for that you know

That's what uou deserve for refusing to join the Guild with me

Fyi it's in a month's time so I'm not dragging you away. I think for you it's March 13

I'll pick you up at 6am

6AM? Are you for re|

IMPORTANT: Strike at Canberra, Australia

Dragon (The Guild) [Tinkertech Evolution] (Team Mom)

Feb. 24 2011

Canberra is under attack. If you are not attending the fight, please evacuate the city. If you are attending the fight, DO NOT ENTER THE BATTLEFIELD WITHOUT AN ARMBAND. DO NOT REMOVE THE ARMBAND. MASTER-STRANGER PROTOCOLS ARE IN EFFECT. MENTAL INFLUENCE SCREENING IS MANDATORY AND NON-NEGOTIABLE.

Pages: 1, 2, 3, 4

Algorithm (Sydney Magpies) [Simulations] (MODERATOR)

Feb. 24 2011

Godspeed, ladies and gentlemen. Make sure you come back, or I'm giving you the (DUNCE!) tag, and you wouldn't want that now, would you?

Remedial (ASIO Affiliate) [Personal Improvement]

Feb. 24 2011

I've been authorised to let you know that the most likely target is the Advanced Biohazard Research Laboratory underneath the Australian National University compound. Do not approach without express permission. Safe detonations are being prepared as we speak.

Flytrap (Protectorate) [Theseus' Drone]

Feb. 24 2011

Please be safe, everyone. I'll buy anyone that comes back a beer, or hell, even two.

Armsmaster (Protectorate) [Miniaturization]

Feb. 24 2011

Please remember to keep distance from the enemy when possible. Past fights have seen the enemy utilize attending Tinkers' tech to their purpose.

IMPORTANT: Strike at Canberra, Australia

Dragon (The Guild) [Tinkertech Evolution] (Team Mom)

Feb. 24 2011

Canberra is under attack. If you are not attending the fight, please evacuate the city. If you are attending the fight, DO NOT ENTER THE BATTLEFIELD WITHOUT AN ARMBAND. DO NOT REMOVE THE ARMBAND. MASTER-STRANGER PROTOCOLS ARE IN EFFECT. MENTAL INFLUENCE SCREENING IS MANDATORY AND NON-NEGOTIABLE.

Pages: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7

Monster Mash (Protectorate) [Combat Drones]

Feb. 24 2011

Here's a .zip with all of my blueprints on them. Thanks for being my friend, everyone. I'll miss you all.
MonsterMash.zip

THIS IS A PRERECORDED MESSAGE TO BE RELEASED ON THE EVENT OF MY DEATH.

Electrum (Canberra Heat) [Alloys]

Feb. 24 2011

I'm not dead, but that's about all I can say. I'm stuck in the fucking hospital and I can hear people getting shot as they try to leave. I can't even try to run away. Please at least make my end mean something. Electrum.zip

Algorithm (Sydney Magpies) [Simulations] (MODERATOR)

Feb. 24 2011

Jesus fuck… I'm sorry, man. Thanks for all the memories.

Dragon (The Guild) [Tinkertech Evolution] (Team Mom)

Feb. 24 2011

Thank you for everything, @Electrum. And I'm sorry.

Blackbird

You can no longer send messages to this person.

Yeah. I love you too.

10:37 PM

Callie are you safe?

Yeah. Are you?

Yeah, injured but fine

Can you come pick me up? I'm at Canberra Hospital. I'll be waiting for you on the roof. God I really need a fucking drink

I can't do that, Aman. I'm sorry.

Quarantine's in place now.

What do you mean you cant

Fuck the quarantine. I swear to god Im not ziz bombed. I was only in the fight for like ten minutes before I got injured and sent to the hospital. I'm safe, Callie.

Please don't make this so hard for me.

This is hard on YOU?

Fuck you, Callie. I fucking hate you. I'd tell you that I'll meet you in hell but I;m already there. If you really loved me at all you'd help me. But you won't. So you hate me too. Duck you. I hope you fucking die

They said you'd behave like that. I'm sorry, Aman, I really am. I love you, Aman, I really do. I've never enjoyed the company of anyone like with you.

I wish I could say more but I can't. Goodbye, Aman. I love you.

I love you too. Please don't leave |

Rose Lambton (@theveryp | Parahumans Online | New Tab

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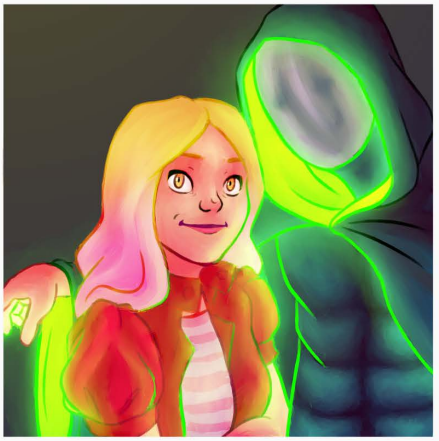
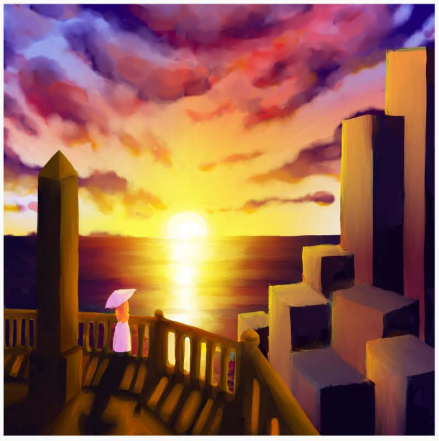
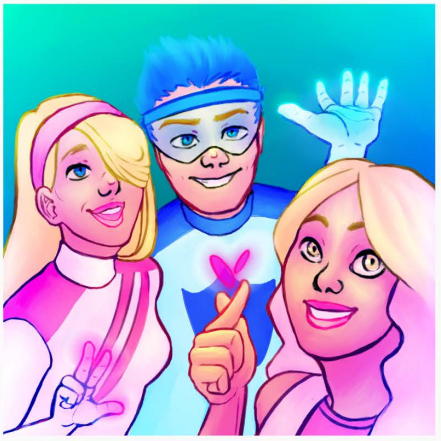
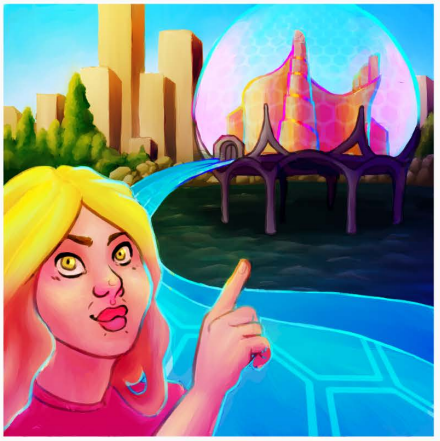
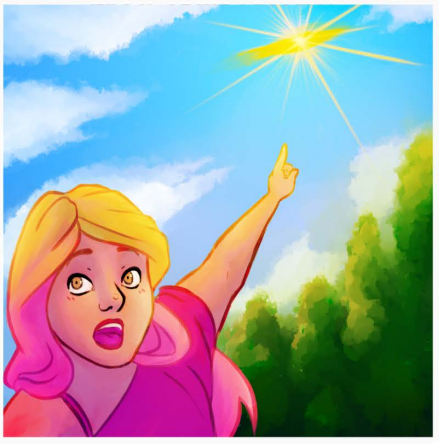







Fuck you, fuck you, fuck you, Ariadne muttered to herself as she laboriously trudged towards the building. A distance that she would have hardly noticed just a few short months ago — less than a hundred feet for God's sake — now stretched out like a hundred miles. But she wasn't going to let anything defeat her.

Certainly not her body.

A sensible person might have had the taxi drop her off closer than the car park. But that had seemed far too much like admitting defeat, something she was never going to do. Especially not over a piddling little thing like this.

It didn't help that she couldn't even walk alongside the path as she usually did, noisily crunching gravel underfoot. It might have been a bit of the child still within her, something a bit playful that she'd never let herself express in any other way. The noise, the sensation always helped clear her mind before the workday began and she bitterly resented that she couldn't do it now. Or rather she could, but given the way she was still struggling with the crutch, the loose stones seemed like a recipe for disaster. The last thing she needed was to make a fool of herself falling over in front of her workplace where everyone could see.

Just one more thing that had been taken away from her.

By the time she was at the faintly iridescent walls of the building, sweat — actual huge drops of sweat — were rolling off her forehead, and she was actually gasping for breath. Recovery would take time, her physiotherapist had said. Her actual therapist too, for that matter.

Fuck you, she mouthed to their imagined faces as she slumped down on a bench outside the entrance. She clawed at the water bottle stuck in one pocket of her backpack and swore as her traitorous fingers let it slip to the ground and roll away. She thought briefly about abandoning it, just pretending it had nothing to do with her, but her mouth was already prickling with dryness and, well, it wasn't as though she needed another problem for when she went inside. So she lowered herself down to the ground, wincing as her muscles betrayed her yet again and she bashed one knee against the concrete. Reaching over to the fallen bottle, she carefully wrapped the fingers of one hand around it, refusing to let go.

Fuck you, she thought at it sternly, before pushing herself back onto the bench and finally, finally getting to take that rest.

As the water did its job, she slumped back against the wall and considered the skyline. What was it going to be like, now that she was probably never going to be out there again, fighting the good fight? Who was going to stop Chillwave from tearing off in the direction of the first sign of trouble? Who was going to help coax Trafalgar from her den the next time she started giving into her hermit tendencies? Who was actually going to manage the team, as opposed to just leading it?

A distant series of cracks from elsewhere in the city jolted her out of her thoughts, adrenaline flooding her system like a kick to her head. Her mind immediately stumbled into analysis mode, trying to figure out who might have caused the noise and whether she needed to do something, but then a sharp spike of agony stabbed her in the brain.

Ow, motherfucking son of a dietician's fucknugget, fuck me, she gabbled to herself, trying to hold onto to anything that wasn't what felt like someone impaling the back of her head on a red hot poker. The distinct sensation of someone pressing far too hard on her left eyeball with a sharpened fingernail didn't help either.

Gradually — far too slowly — the pain subsided, and she was left trembling in the aftermath. Well, if she'd needed a sign, some might have said that was it. As if all the others weren't enough. *Fuck you,* she told the headache and thought wistfully of the painkillers in her bag. But no. She'd lost enough already and she wasn't going to lose anything more, even her pain. Besides, she wasn't going to hand Ocelot any more ammunition. God knew he'd be able to sniff out even anything as innocuous as aspirin just by getting within five feet of her.

The good news was that by the time she was able to think about getting up from the bench without feeling like her head would split open, she'd recovered enough of her breath that she wouldn't look like a total mess. Just most of one. But her pride could survive that much.

Thankfully no one on reception questioned the woman hobbling across the lobby and into the elevator. She thought about going over to say hi as she'd used to, but no. She didn't have the energy for that today. Maybe never again. Equally thankfully the elevator didn't have a problem with matching her and her ID despite, well, everything. There was a part of her that couldn't help hoping it was because she hadn't changed that much really, though she'd take the system just being that smart. As opposed to the indignity of someone actually having to update her vital statistics so she wouldn't have to get stuck here while security was called.

The doors opened, revealing the full majesty of the Protectorate floor. She really wasn't surprised to find that in her absence, empty coffee cups had started to colonise every available surface. The half-completed matchstick replica of the Entelechy was a surprise, but maybe it shouldn't have been. There was at least one comfortingly familiar sight: Snickersnack, curly locks peeking out from under the mask slid up on top of her head, propping her feet up on a chair as she leafed through a book. Doubtless one of the romance novels she bought by the pound -- literally. She looked up as Ariadne's crutch clicked against the floor, and Ariadne hated being able to count the three long seconds it took for recognition to cross Snick's face.

Not that Snick hadn't been a regular visitor, but apparently visiting a wreck in a hospital bed was different to seeing said wreck turn up in one's workplace.

"Hey, Ariadne," Snick said, getting to her feet and pasting a smile on her face. "Good to see you around."

"Yes, well. I thought it was about time to get my stuff," Ariadne said, hating how slurred her voice still was. She tried her best to give a smile back, all too aware of how it probably looked.

Ariadne could see the thoughts crawl across Snick's face. About how she doubtless knew that Tangle had said that she could keep her office for as long as she wanted. Probably some platitudes about how she'd always be a part of the team. Maybe even about how they could still use her. But thankfully none of that made it past her mouth and instead she simply nodded. "Mind some company?"

Ariadne seriously thought about refusing, but it was Snick. If anyone wouldn't tax her reserves of energy today it was her. She hated that she had to think of things that way now, but it was what it was. "Sure."

There was a scuffle and a clatter of feet and Ocelot's lanky form bounded into view. "Hi, Arcana!" he practically yelled, a cheesy smirk on his face.

Ariadne could remember when she'd had patience for him, in the before times. Could even remember when she'd liked him, his shyness slowly being coaxed from him, to be unfortunately replaced by brashness. Now, though, he just seemed to bug the everliving shit out of her, regardless of how unfair that might irrationally be. Especially when he called her that.

"I'm not Arcana," she practically growled. Not now. Not ever again, probably. And she hated how she couldn't help adding that qualifier; like some part of her still hoped that she'd be able to see the weave of light as anything other than a mirage out of the corner of her eye or as flashes in some aching dream.

It didn't help that all the specialists had just kind of given her a shrug. Even now, there was still so much unknown about powers.

Fuck Apis and whatever he'd done to her. Even if he was still protesting that he hadn't meant to do it.

Ocelot jumped back a bit at her tone, his smile fading a little. "Of course, of course. Ariadne," he said, emphasising her name. "I'm just glad to see you up and about, even if you do seem to be a bit grumpy."

"Fuck you," she told him, completely out of patience for his shit. "Just, fuck you." She took a breath, dragged the corners of her mouth up as far as she could. "Little Miss Sunshine is really not in right now." She hobbled in the direction of her office as quickly as she could before she did something stupid like burst into tears. Slamming the door shut behind her — not an easy task, with her crutch — she took some time to just breathe long and slow, focusing on the rhythm until random bursts of emotion stopped cycling within her.

The place was just as she'd left it, all those many weeks ago when she'd set out to deal with the alert. Fuck, there was even that half completed report still lying in her in-tray, as though it was waiting for her to complete it. "Sorry," she told it. "I think you're out of luck." Even if she'd still been working for the Protectorate, she couldn't trust her writing worth a damn at the moment. Certainly not to match the neat cursive that she'd always been so proud of.

Fuck it, she told herself. She'd just have to learn how to do it again.

She left the report there, half finished, forever orphaned, and started to collect what personal effects she still had. Some photos, of her, of friends, of family. Even her ex. A watch that her mother had given her. A plush Arcana that had been a present from her niece.

There was soft tapping from the door. She twisted around and glared at the glass, ready and willing to curse Ocelot out if he'd decided to give it another try, but it was just Snick, looking hesitant.

"Hey," she said. "You still up for company?"

Ariadne let the breath hiss from out of her mouth. “Sure. Can’t promise how pleasant I’m going to be, but feel free to suffer me regardless.”

“I don’t think you have to worry about Ocelot any time soon. He disappeared back in the direction of his rooms, tail between his legs.”

Ariadne made a face and quashed the worm of guilt that threatened to writhe in her gut. “Sorry I’m not in the mood to play peacemaker at the moment.”

“Oh, God, no. Don’t even think about apologising for that. If any feathers need to be unruffled, well…” Snick hesitated.

“Tangle can handle that for once. He is supposed to be team lead after all.” Snick made an exaggerated face to show what she thought of that and Ariadne couldn’t help laughing. “Thanks,” she said. “I needed that.”

“Any time,” Snick said wryly, then fell silent as Ariadne continued to shove things inside her backpack. Ariadne thought about asking her if she knew what those cracks had been earlier, then quashed the urge. Doubtless it was just some prick of a cape showing off. Not to mention it really wasn’t her business any more. Then she couldn’t help worrying if Snick was uncomfortable with the silence, as opposed to their usual easy chatter before.

Before. Always the full stop dividing then from now.

“Look,” Snick finally said. “I like to think that we’ve been friends, even if we’ve never really hung out outside of work.” She paused. *Here it comes,* Ariadne thought with a twist in her stomach. “But given that’s going to be a little hard now… What would you say to changing that?”

Oh.

Ariadne wanted to say no. Wanted to just cut the cord now, rather than waiting for the meet ups to happen less and less as Snick found other things to do with her time. Other priorities, like saving the city for example.

But, fuck it. Hadn’t her therapist been saying that she needed to start letting people in again? Snick was… Snick probably the easiest to even think about doing that with.

“Sure. Let’s meet up sometime.” She gave Snick her civilian phone number, storing Snick’s number under Diane.

“Thanks,” Snick said, giving her a bright smile. “Now all I’ve got to worry about is Ocelot finding out.”

“Let me guess. He’s already making noises about how you should ask me out, now that we’re not working together any more.”

Snick winced. “Was it you or me that gave him that excuse in the first place?”

“Probably me.” Ariadne felt less bad about snapping at him earlier. Why couldn’t the little fuck understand that queer women can like each other without actually wanting to jump each other’s bones? Better yet, why couldn’t he understand it was none of his goddamn business in the first place?

If there was one thing around this place that she had absolutely no patience for anymore, it was pointlessly making nice. And second place was the way that talking just didn’t seem to come easily any more. She couldn’t help wondering if she should feel more weirded out by that, whether it was just that she didn’t have the energy for that anymore, or if it was another symptom of the brain damage.

Fuck it. She could save the existential angst for later, or maybe her next therapy session.

“See you around?” she offered as she stuffed the last thing she was interested in taking with her — a snow globe the office Secret Santa had gotten her two years ago — into her bag.

“Sure,” Snick said, escorting her back to the elevator. Ariadne should probably feel grumpier that she felt the need to do that, but she couldn’t quite manage the outrage after she almost stumbled on the way out of the door. And thankfully Snick didn’t push her luck by offering to see her out of the building. The last thing Ariadne saw was a bright wave as the elevator doors closed, leaving Ariadne looking at her own face, the left hand side drooping and unresponsive.

Ariadne didn’t give it the victory of looking away. “Fuck you,” she told it.

She’d get better, learn how to cope better, even if her powers never did come back. And, hell, with the pension the Protectorate had given her, maybe she’d even get to go to college; make something of herself apart from the violence and groundwork of being a hero.

Maybe she’d learn how to draw strength from being around others again. Maybe she’d even manage to become that artist she’d dreamed about becoming way back when.

Maybe she wouldn’t let anything stop her.

And to fate, the universe at large, and whatever might have the temerity to think it could get in her way, she had only one thing to say.

“Fuck you.”

Strider [Mass Teleporter, Transport & Evac] (NA / Global)

Aliases: Strider
Customer Rating: 4.3/5 ★★★★☆
Site Ranking: 🏆47th
Active since: February 2002
Location: Generally NA, can work globally with advance notice.
Services:

- **Commercial** - Instant / Fast transportation of equipment or employees for rush projects, stock management, site clearing, and sales. Scheduling and quantities discussed in advance.
- **Entertainment** - Deluxe trips to pre-authorized destinations **(Listed here)**, with a number of optional cross-continental routes for visiting multiple tourist sites in a day. Wait list may be long depending on the season. Check Contact page for booking.
- **Confidential** - Discreet, nigh untraceable transportation for verified legal activities.
- **Cape Collaborations** - Non-combat focused collaborations for Cape activities, including large-scale battlefield maneuvering, base breaches, evacuations and rescues - with further options for unique power synergies. Check Accolades and Past Collaborators pages for details.
- **Emergency Response -** Contracts for future crisis scenarios*, agreed upon well in advance of said events. I take only a limited number of such passive contracts, but in rare cases of simultaneous crises there will be a priority queue based on the dangers involved (Saving lives over property), the urgency, the age of the contract, and the contract type.

Warnings:

- ***Endbringer attacks and potentially other S-Class threats will always have the highest priority!** Active civilian contracts may be temporarily suspended. I won't take contracts designed around personal evacuation from such events, as I will likely be working with the PRT / local heroes on evacuation and reinforcements regardless.
- I try to be strict with the agreed upon rules of my contracts, both for your benefit and mine. Communicate any requests or changes to your circumstances clearly, and the work will be efficient and quick.
- If I am unable to assist / complete a contract due to an emergency or prior injury, you will be compensated in full as well as given preferential treatment and discounts on future contracts.
- Fishing for details on my power is a no go. If I say something can't be done, either accept it or hire someone else.

[Contact] [Images] [Accolades] **[Reviews]** [Past Collaborators] [Website Links] [Merch]

> **[Pinned Review]** ★★★★★ - A Trustworthy Ally
> **By:** Alexandria **(Verified Cape, Protectorate)**
>
> There are few assurances to be had in a time of crisis. Chaos and doubts have a way of limiting your perspective, complicating choices and obfuscating solutions.
> The best way to alleviate those doubts and control the chaos is to make sure you have people you can trust watching your back.
> In recent years, there has been nothing quite as reassuring as the dim thunderclap of Strider's arrival at the battlefield. The certainty that in an instant, more people you trust have joined you to turn the tides. The knowledge that in an instant, anyone you wanted to protect can be safe and sound. … **[Read More]**

Sort reviews by: Random

★★★☆☆ – Decent work, but inflexible and redundant
By: Nicholas_Mitchell **(Private Sector)**

Hired him for some urgent, high value industrial transports. Everyone knows that this kind of sudden logistical maneuvering is rife with surprises and obstacles to overcome, but he remained strict to the letter of the deal. Still got the job done, but the added delays from the complications made me wonder: Why bother with teleportation if he only operates with advance notice and such a strict schedule?

P.S. for a "Mass Teleporter" he seems to have a small limit on total mass he can move with. **[Show Less]**

★★★★★ – Professional, heroic and dependable
By: PRT.Morgan_Keene **(Verified PRT Liaison)**

The PRT is proud to cooperate with and support upstanding individuals like Strider. His dedication to the safety of the American people, and humanity at large, is nothing short of valiant.
Strider knows to put the safety of his allies and the innocents in his charge first, and even when operating outside the bounds of heroism he sticks to his code without wavering. It is an honor to… **[Read More]**

★★★★★ – wtf
By: KEVIN121

his fast as shit**!!**

★★★★★ – Saved me once
By: Sammymarzipan

Never thought about reviewing here until now, but he saved my life 3 years ago in the big fire in Memphis. One moment I'm stuck in a dark cloud, barely breathing, with no idea where to go, next moment I'm outside surrounded by equally confused people. Saw him vanish and reappear with four others before I was escorted away by the paramedics. I never even got to thank him for… **[Read More]**

★★★★★ – LITERALLY the #1 Cape...
By: PFF.Snooser

In Bedlam Brawl: Burnout. Can't believe his card hasn't gotten nerfed yet, but I hope it never will be. Like damn I know devs always make Movers OP in racing games, but being able to transfer an entire fleet of cars halfway across the biggest map in the game in 10 seconds?? Insane.
Also his intro animation is SICK!
Edit: F

★☆☆☆☆ – Glorified taxi driver
By: W3.NeXeReX

Way overrated, couldn't beat a C-tier cape in a fair 1v1 fight. People on here treat him like some sort of triumvirate superstar just cause he works with them a bunch?? If he weren't around they would just use any tinker's vehicle or some fast PRT Jet. Someone paid him 20k for a DAY of work? Total scam.

★★★★☆ – Why are the blue ones always so speedy?
By: JoeSafe0@Wmail

Edit: Deleted because it's too inappropriate now. Will write something once I compose my thoughts.

Sort reviews by: New

★★★★★ – Just heard the news
By: Pivot **(Verified Cape)**

Feeling devastated... My condolences to everyone who knew someone in Brockton.
In recent years, my team has had to rely on Strider's help for urgent deployments to Endbringer fights. Living in North Dakota puts us outside the reach of most Movers - I genuinely have no idea how we could pitch in from now on, and I doubt we're the only ones. This loss will sting, in more ways than one.

★★☆☆☆ – YOOOOO WHAT HAPPENED???
By: Jaaaaaaaaababo

WHY DIDNT HE JUST TELEPORT AWAY B4 BEING HIT? MY CAPEBALL TEAM IS REKT

★★★★★ – RIP
By: TangentBlob

**** Leviathan. This is just gonna make all the WhoWouldWin nerds pit him against other Movers now. Even more capes to get jinxed. Stupid ******* snake ***** ********

★★★★★ – He was a great guy
By: Wallace-A-

This is nuts.. Not sure why the PRT published his real name, maybe it was in his will or something - but it's surreal to wake up one day and find out the kid I used to play basketball with back in middle school grew up to be one of the fastest people on the planet, and he's dead now. No idea how to react.

Guess this is my review for Craig more than Strider: He was always fun to play with, but not someone I knew that closely. Sometimes didn't see him for weeks, then suddenly we'd meet at the courtyard and have a blast like nothing happened. He wasn't even in the top half of the people we played with, but I always liked being on a team with him because he kept his cool and didn't sweat it when I messed up.

Haven't talked to him since high school when he moved. Kinda wish I reached out now… Glad to know he did something big with his life, though. Rest in peace man. **[Show Less]**

★★★★★ – I was there
By: Josh_K

I was in Brockton when he died, hiding in the shelter. Never even saw him but for all I know I might be alive because of him and all the other defenders. I even heard one of the other shelters was attacked… Terrifying. Thank you for your service.

★★★★★ – bro this sucks
By: 007BamesJond

scrolled through the list and my heart sunk when I saw his name. why is it always the coolest ones???

★☆☆☆☆ – Why is everyone freaking out??
By: 4239732476

Who even is this guy? Literally never heard of him before and this listing is going crazy. Lots of people died there, get over it lol
Edit: Stop PMing me, I don't care!!

Sort reviews by: Random

★★★★★ – A pleasure to work with
By: Temporare **(Verified Cape)**

Got hired alongside him for a big job in Albuquerque, and it went smooth as butter. A surprising amount of oddball tactics are available when you plan ahead and move that quickly.

Joked around with him and the rest of the team at the end of a long day, and he decided to take us out for drinks at his favorite bar in Atlanta. Stand-up guy. Just don't get him started on chicken wings!

★★★☆☆ – He's alright
By: Mrsmai_-_

I liked his cameo in season 3 of the protectorate cartoon. Not sure what else he's known for.
Edit: Oh damn now I know.

★★★★★ – Reliable and Efficient
By: Guild.Narwhal **(Verified Cape, The Guild)**

The definition of an excellent all-around Cape, in terms of power, personality, experience, and cooperativeness. Any global organization needs someone like him as an asset or a friend.

★★★★☆ – ****** up my entire life at the right time
By: throwaway86745302

Not sure I'm allowed to post this so I'll skimp on details, but the story is out there. I was part of a fairly entrenched gang in the east coast a few years ago, in a medium sized town without many heroes. Had a 'sponsorship' with a regional 'organization' that let us pretty much take over. The two local Capes had no idea how to deal with us, and at some point we thought they gave up.

Turns out they were gathering intel and funding. They hired this guy with some friend of his - and our gang imploded overnight. Entire bases ransacked, anything not nailed to the floor gone. A third of our members woke up in jail without any memory of what happened. No leadership, no resources, no weapons. It all just vanished, without a single ******* fight.

I was one of the lucky ones that weren't around that night and just found myself homeless, with all of my friends gone or in hiding. Went back to my parents' house, decided to start fresh. Really sucked at first but I'm doing better now. Maybe it was the wake-up call I needed. Could've gone a lot worse I guess.

Still docking one star because he took my god damn laptop. **[Show Less]**

★★★★★ – Orem, Utah Hero?
By: ZeroParadox

A lot of people are looking into him now that his name is out there, even saw a video of someone that looks just like him showing up at a parade here a few years back - is it true that he was based around Orem? Maybe that's kind of irrelevant considering his power, but it'd be cool to know our town was represented by such a great guy. Rest in peace.

★★★★★ – His last post
By: grayinkpen

Saw his last post talking about future plans... so depressed rn. Even someone like him didn't get a chance to visit everywhere he wanted to. Things just keep getting worse here, so I hope he's in a better place.

★★★★★ – Important Memory
By: clairity99

Didn't know I could post a review here before, but I'm seeing a lot of messages from people like me… Umm, where to start? I was in the hospital 5 years ago for a pretty long time because of kidney problems. Doctors weren't very optimistic. After a really bad week, Strider came to visit.
We talked for a while and he asked me about my drawings. I drew a lot of places I saw on TV, and he asked me if I wanted to go see them for real.
There were a lot of checks and tests, and a doctor and my parents came with us, but over the next few hours we went to so many different places… Some were ones I asked for, like the pyramids and aifel tower. Some were secret spots that I still don't even know where they are, like a cave full of glowing rocks or a giant field of purple flowers, just because I said it was my favorite color.
I don't remember much from that time in the hospital anymore, but that day is something I hope I never forget. I like to imagine it took up all of the space in my head so I don't have to remember the rest.

A few months after his visit, I started getting better because of a new treatment. Never got to meet him again. But when I'm older I want to try volunteering at hospitals too, even if I can't do it like he did.
[Show Less]

★★★★★ – Strider
By: Aileen_McNish

Reading through all of these new messages, misplaced as some of them might be, I get the impression that Strider was a lot of things to a lot of different people. A friend, a comrade, a colleague, an inspiration or a figure to vent about... He made a lot of people proud, but I already knew that.
I've seen requests to close this section down, but personally I think people deserve these places to grieve and share their stories of him. Maybe some other website would suit that better, but I'm not used to these sorts of things.

Strider spent a lot of his last years in this business, maybe more than some might realize and more than he should have. He didn't *need* this much work, of course… given the numbers thrown around here, I'm starting to think that much, much more of his income went into charities and Parahuman organizations than he publicly and privately spoke about.

At first I thought it was wanderlust, an addiction to the lifestyle, using the work as an excuse… but I realize now why he felt it was his responsibility, his purpose. He was stubborn about pursuing it, even though the danger that something like this might happen was obvious to everyone around him.

As for a review, in my interactions with him he was always kind, humble, and caring. Distant at times (excuse the pun) but you could tell his heart was in the right place. He motivated people to be better, though sometimes he was too hard on himself. He was loved.

I only hope that all of the good he inspired in his life will outweigh the hurt caused by his death. He will be missed. **[Show Less]**

REC
21:30:06

My Christmas Angel

12/20/2002:

~~Hiya journal!~~

I was gonna start with hiya diary but you're not really a diary are you? Mom said I can't take my diary with me in case I lose it somewhere, but you're a journal so that's different. You're going to be packed last, right on top of my puffy Legend jacket so I'll ~~defen~~...~~difen~~...never ever lose you.

Hopefully I won't lose that jacket too. It's going to be really super duper cold on our vacation, lots of snow and ice and the mushy stuff that isn't proper snow but isn't ice either. I'm not sure what that's called but that'll be there too. Ben probably knows, Mom took him on the same trip a few years ago when I was too little to go, but he's being mean and slammed his bedroom door in my face even though I kept asking really nicely.

Oh right, the trip! We're going to Europe for Christmas! I'm gonna learn how to ski! It sounds really complicated.

But I'll try!

And if it gets too hard then I can just go exploring or something I guess. Europe's old, right? There's must be stuff there to find. Like a cape's secret lair hidden in the mountains. That'd be cool. Steph keeps saying I'm stupid looking for things like that but she's probably just jealous that she has to stay in school. I'll take some

pictures for her. Maybe she'll be less upset afterwards.

Need to remember to pack that as well. Kind of hard to take photos if I leave my camera behind.

And pens too, the nice ones with gel, need to pack them. Maybe some snacks. ...I should have started packing earlier.

I better start doing that before Mom finds out that my bags are still kind of empty. Talk to you later, journal! We're gonna have a great vacation together!

Love, Melissa.

12/27/2002:

I'm freezing but in a good way!

We've been skiing, and exploring, and looking at all the Christmas lights, and there's so much snow! It's all over the place. Europe is so much colder than back home.

Okay, one thing at a time. Mom gets cross when I go too fast and don't explain things. She already got cross at me once today because I couldn't say the country's name properly, but Dad said it was okay to just keep calling it Europe so long as I did it quietly.

It's just really difficult to slow down when there's so much going on. I haven't even updated you for like a week which was really naughty but I'm doing it now

so that makes it better.

Right, one at a time. We've been here for a few days now, staying at a hotel in this big city. I can't spell the city's name but I know it starts with an L. It's so beautiful. Lots of tall buildings that light up at night, with great big arches of fairy lights strung between them. Not as tall as some of the buildings back home, but these ones have snow on top so they're cooler.

When I look out the hotel's window at night the entire city is like a gigantic snow globe.

Not as much snow as the skiing place though. All the hills there were covered in a great big fluffy blanket of white. I didn't really understand skiing, the teacher tried to be nice but he kept going on about pizzas and French fries which just made me really hungry so I wandered off to take photos instead.
It was difficult though, taking pictures of people skiing down the hill. They moved too fast, especially the ones with really tight clothes on. One man's outfit looked like Eidolon's costume and he did a backflip on his snowboard. I don't think it was the real Eidolon though. He probably doesn't like snowboarding.

But the absolute bestest part is the markets. Underneath the tall buildings people have set up these old wooden stalls and they sell all kinds of things. Shiny things, and sparkly things, and things that play music...

And food. There's so much food. They have all these meats and the chefs put them into buns for you which was nice of them. Although I might have used a little bit

too much apple sauce because it dribbled down my jacket when I took a bite, and I had to go back to our room to change. Mom really wasn't happy after that. But the smell is so strong you can almost taste the roast pork from the front of the hotel anyways so it worked out.

It's all so Christmasy.

Is that a word? It should be.

Anyways, this will have to do for now. I wanna go back out in the markets again and hear all the carols. I don't recognise most of the songs but it's fun to clap with them.

Oh, and I'll take a picture of the crowd outside too! A whole load of people were gathering in the town square nearby, next to this big angel statue. It makes wonderful music. Dad thinks there are some speakers hidden inside.

See you later, journal!

Love, Melissa.

12/28/2002:
Merry late Christmas, journal!

It's only been one day since I last remembered to update you, so I'm getting better! But I did forget to say happy Christmas last time so maybe I'm not getting that much better. This will have to be a quick update though, there's so much still going on and I don't want to miss any of it.

Turns out in this part of Europe, they celebrate Christmas for a whole week after the actual day, and everybody is invited to play. All the decorations stayed up in the hotel which was weird because Mom never lets us leave them up after Christmas day, and then a whole bunch of people got together in a parade that went up and down the city. I joined in, and some nice lady gave me a hat with a bell on it. I haven't taken it off yet. Mom hates it.

The markets are still there, and they're still just as busy. I saw some capes in the crowd too!

I think. Maybe they were just normal people wearing funny hats too. Doesn't really matter. My hat is the best.

It's magic.

I know that sounds silly, but it's true. Remember that music playing statue? It's not a statue anymore!

So we'd just finished walking with one of the parades, and they ended in front of the statue. Lots of the parades have been ending there. Makes sense, it's a really nice place. Anyways, there were all these news vans there and reporters talking about things in lots of languages that I didn't know, but they all seemed really happy. I had my camera too and there was still film left, and if they were all taking pictures then I'd want to take some too, so I told Dad and he helped me sneak past the crowds to get to the statue.

Up close it's even more beautiful. I thought it had clothes draped over it, like the

old Roman clothes, but when you really look they were actually wings. It had another pair of wings circling around its head like a halo.

And everyone knows that a Christmas hat is the best thing to wear under a halo, so I gave Dad my camera, and climbed the statue.

Its feathers were really sharp. Like, I thought they'd be all soft and fluffy, like that one pigeon who got stuck in our yard, but these ones cut my hands up when I climbed them. My mittens have holes in them now. Mom was really mad when she saw that.

But it was so worth it. I stuck my hat on top of the angel's head, Dad took a picture, and then he dropped my camera. I wanted to tell him off until he pointed at the statue.

It was looking directly at me. The singing was majestic.

I might have fallen off because it was cold and my fingers were numb, not because I was scared or anything. But before I hit my head on the floor, it caught me.

My Christmas angel caught me.

Some of the police got super upset with us, but the reporters kept shouting questions instead. Dad translated a couple, and he told me everyone was really excited about the angel, that it had come down from the moon.

I think he was making that part up. You can't live on the moon, it's made of cheese.

Since then, it feels like the whole city has come out to see her. The angel has been helping out here and there, moving cars that slid off the road or clearing snow away to make things safer. But it always comes back to the square, to sing along with everyone. I'm always there in the crowd, waving at it. I get a smile in return. My angel doesn't smile at just anybody.

She always comes back for me.

I really need to go now journal, but I promise to write in you more often. Love, Melissa

00/00/0000:

The parades are bigger. It feels like the whole country is taking part. Nobody has wound down. We're all too excited to stop.

More tourists are coming and going. We're supposed to go soon. I don't want to leave. Mom wanted us to go. She wouldn't explain why. She never does. She always hated the angel. My angel.

I tried to tell Mom why we had to stay. She didn't care. I tried so hard.

The angel's song helped me. Words came out of the beautiful melody. Showed me how to convince her.

I tried again. We argued. She kept shouting.

01/04/2003:

I think I'm going mad.

The men with guns still won't let me leave and I still don't have any good answers for them. I think they're getting annoyed. I thought they'd be happy now that I stopped asking them questions. Mom seems happier whenever I stop talking.

Wherever she is.

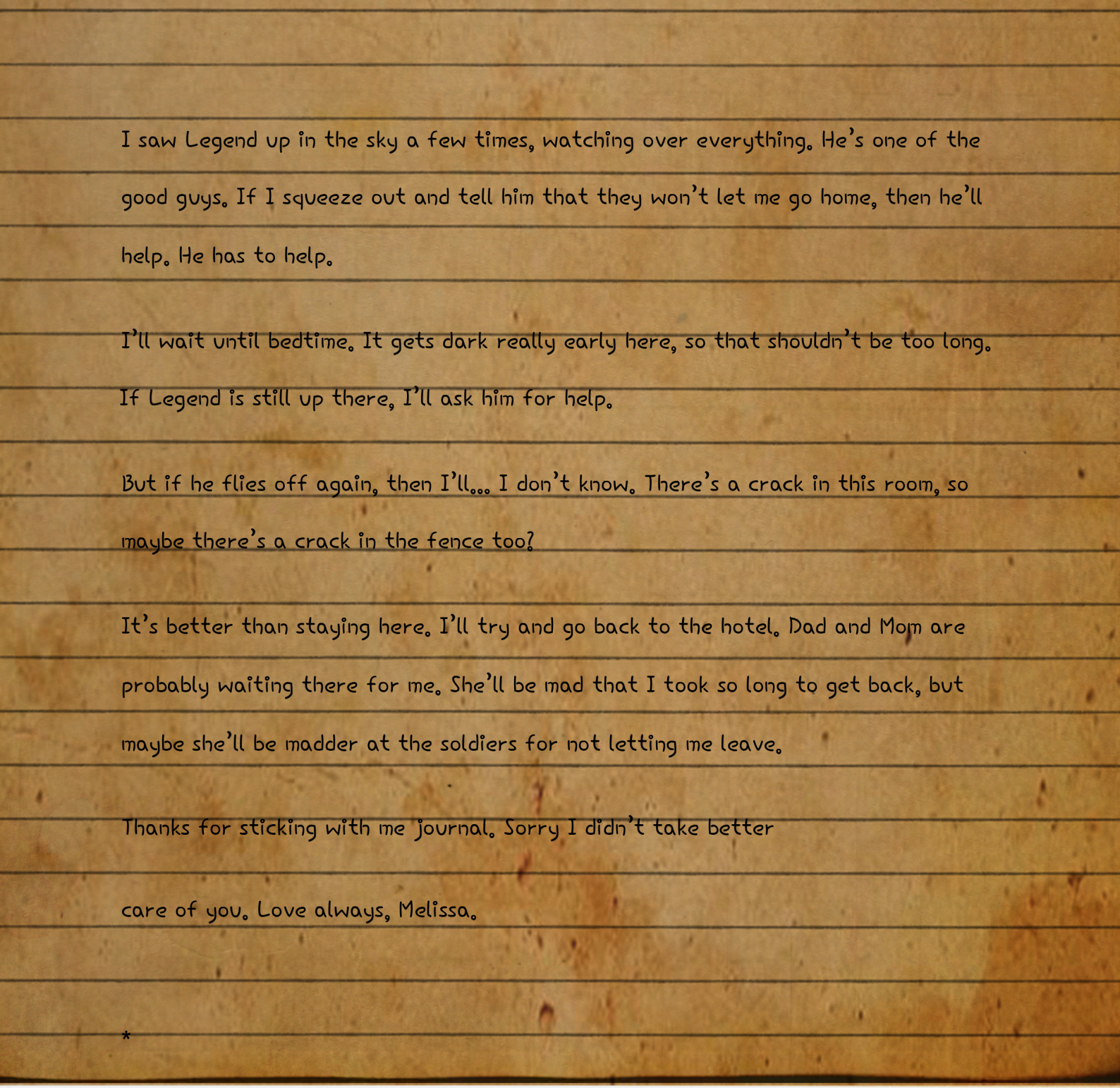
More capes came to see me. They demanded that they get to look through you. Then they got mad at some of the entries.

I don't even remember writing some of what was in there. It's written in my handwriting, but when I think back I can't even remember putting the words on the paper. There was even more rain. Sorry again journal.

I can't stay here. All they do is put me through tests and questions and I can't answer most of them and then it's back to the little room.

Dad and Mom might be out there. Maybe they found my angel.

I want to go home.
There's a tiny crack in the back corner of the room. They built this place really quick, and missed a few pieces on the way. It would be a tight fit, but I think I can squeeze through.


I saw Legend up in the sky a few times, watching over everything. He's one of the good guys. If I squeeze out and tell him that they won't let me go home, then he'll help. He has to help.

I'll wait until bedtime. It gets dark really early here, so that shouldn't be too long. If Legend is still up there, I'll ask him for help.

But if he flies off again, then I'll... I don't know. There's a crack in this room, so maybe there's a crack in the fence too?

It's better than staying here. I'll try and go back to the hotel. Dad and Mom are probably waiting there for me. She'll be mad that I took so long to get back, but maybe she'll be madder at the soldiers for not letting me leave.

Thanks for sticking with me journal. Sorry I didn't take better

care of you. Love always, Melissa.

*

The final page turned, and he snapped the tattered book shut. Its spine had been bent, and the pages were stained, but it still served its purpose dutifully.

This was why they were here. The capes up there, in their fancy outfits, they didn't have the stomach for something like this. They would have read the same words as him, and faltered, falling short at a time when even a moment's hesitation meant the difference between a life saved or another funeral.

He'd almost been guilty of the same sin. The necessity of it was plain to see, but that didn't make the act itself palatable. If it hadn't been for this little book, worn and beaten, he might not have had the will to go through with it himself.

Carefully, he slid the journal into one of the pouches lining his ballistic vest. Another weight, to counterbalance the rifle hanging from his other side.
"Captain!" A voice boomed from behind him. He turned slightly, thoughts still on the book. One of his comms officers was jogging up the hill, a note clutched tight in their hands. Old fashioned messengers would have to suffice for now, after he'd lost his radio fighting a baker who had seemed perfectly normal right up until the man tried to shove a bread knife through his lung.

"Message for you Sir!" The junior officer fired off a crisp salute.

"At ease. Show me." His subordinate visibly relaxed before handing over

the slip of paper. A condemnation, hastily written out by their superiors.

Sector lost. Sweep and clear.

Two years of fighting against people, good people, whose only crime was being in the wrong place at the wrong time. He'd never liked it.

He'd read that little girl's words a hundred times by now. Not much older than his own daughters. The book had been abandoned and he never learned what happened to her, but he couldn't imagine that she'd be happy living life as a walking time bomb.

So he'd do it for them. Provide them with the mercy they desperately needed. A way out of a nightmare.

"Get the men ready. We're moving in five." Dismissing the officer, he gazed out at the remains of Lausanne. Too many people had wrung their hands, dismissing the severity of the problem, and now the city was hell on earth.

The necessity of taking such decisive action had been made clear, time and time again. So he'd do this for them. An end to the misery was the least they deserved.

As the sounds of marching footsteps echoed behind him, Captain James Tagg tapped the pouch on his vest, and descended back into the madness.

Vacation
Dec 2000

Mom was kinda annoyed but thats ok, she told me to turn off the take my camera with

This is the angel.

Look how pretty

In the early morning of August 5th, 1987, the sky above Wapakoneta, Ohio split open. It has never resealed.

Even at the time, the *how* and *why* were not a mystery; Professor Haywire, the type specimen for the villainous form of the Tinker classification of parahumans, claimed responsibility immediately. His stated motive was to unify the disparate dimension he had identified into a single entity, under the belief that this would allow the collective inhabitants to access heretofore unrealized amounts of energy. Whether Haywire's claims as to his motivation were truthful has been a subject of intense debate since the moment he identified himself as the perpetrator; regardless, he was certainly an egomaniac who viewed himself as heir to the Space Race pioneers he had grown up admiring. In a bizarre attempt at forging a historical parallel between himself and his heroes, he chose the place and day of birth of the first man to set foot on the Moon, catapulting a tiny town to the front of newspapers worldwide.

Haywire became the subject of a national manhunt, a precursor to the kill orders of today. Whatever bridges he may have wanted to build between worlds, he began by burning them instead.

- *Twilight of the Dawn: The End of the Golden Age of Capes* (2005), by Maurice Goodwin

> *"Inevitably it was a national crisis. Look at Cuba, back in the 60s, they were one hundred, two hundred miles away and it was a crisis. In '87 we had missiles in Ohio and no intelligence on the other side like we had with the Soviets. Of course it was a crisis."*
>
> - Jeremy Cole, Department of Defense (Bet)
>
> *"It was a completely unprecedented situation. We had no idea how to react except to go, 'Hell if we'll roll over for you.'"*
>
> - Christopher Westerman, Department of Defense (Aleph)

I like to begin any class on Interdimensional Relations with these two quotes. One fascinating aspect of the Aleph-Bet split is that it allows us to see how America relates to itself. Faced with its mirror image, the America of the Cold War judged itself an enemy.

For those of us who grew up on Bet, it's easy to argue that this was rational paranoia. We, after all (at least those of my generation) remembered the arrival of Scion and the emergence of superpowers; moreover, the anxiety of Haywire's terrorism cannot be separated from the paranoia gripping the nation over the series of spree killings later credited to the Slaughterhouse Nine.

But if the nuclear standoff of those early days was all due to Bet's fear of a new earth-shaking revelation, why Aleph's response? From their initial perspective, they were greeted not by monsters, but by a near-identical world where Ronald Reagan still led the U.S. and *Back to the Future* had been a box office hit two years prior. In many ways, Aleph was a crystalized

version of Bet five years prior, before the fascinating new hope of superheroes arrived. Their reaction was established government policy, and so, I would argue, was ours.

- *A War Within Us*, blog post by Peter Ortega

The resulting standoff was in many ways paradoxical, with both sides simultaneously knowing too much and too little about the manpower and nuclear capabilities of the other. While initial strategies on both sides were made assuming identical resources, stray radio and television transmissions began to paint a different story. Media speculation on Earth Bet ran towards theories concerning potential intervention by Scion, which was quickly picked up on by both the federal government and residents of nearby towns who received interfering broadcasts through the newly-created portal. As it was initially unclear how long Earth Bet had had individuals with superpowers, or 'parahumans', the political atmosphere quickly became panicked over the potential power mismatch between countries.

(Later interviews with Bet Department of Defense staff revealed that they did not confirm Aleph's lack of parahumans for two days, due to the paucity and obscurity of powered individuals in Bet at that time.)

[...]

This conflict set the stage for the thirteen years of wary relations we have experienced so far. Even after the negotiation of a truce between Americas, international tensions between both Americas and other nations in their respective dimensions rose due to the United States's newfound monopoly on interdimensional trade. While the existence of parallel dimensions has become a background fact of life, the emergence of the two Endbringers has reignited worries of an invasion through Ohio or mass influx of refugees from Bet.

- *First Contact, First Blood?: Examining Interdimensional Tensions* (2000), Laurence Stokes

"IT HAPPENED TO ME, BUT NOT TO ME," - JAPAN WATCHES AS BET COUNTERPART DROWNS

The estimated death toll in Earth Bet's Kyushu has reached five million and is expected to increase, three days after the Endbringer 'Leviathan' attacked the island.

The outlook for Japan Bet is grim, and aftershocks are rapidly spreading through Japan Aleph. The prime minister issued a statement of mourning and solidarity to their Bet counterparts, but has stated his desire for life in Kyushu to continue as normal, encouraging the celebration of Culture Day to continue on November 3rd, the day the attack in Bet concluded. However, on the streets of Fukuoka - Kyushu's most populous city and the center of the devastation - the atmosphere is tense. People avoid the harbor, and memorials to the dead have been set up throughout the city, despite official discouragement from the city.

Awareness of the depth of the devastation and the rising death toll is causing uncertainty and fear in many citizens.

“They say that everyone over the age of seventeen has a counterpart in the other world,” says Jiro Shimada. “I’m fifty-four and I’ve lived in Fukuoka since I was a child. There, I am almost certainly dead. It feels like waking up from a nightmare, knowing that something terrible has happened to me - but then I look at the news and remember, oh, that did happen. It happened to me, but not to me.”

“I tried to forget that [Bet] existed,” Hideo Wakabayashi says. “Whenever I hear news from it, it frightens me. But I can’t forget this, and that frightens me more. It’s too close to home.”

Other citizens argue that Japan should send relief funds to its Bet counterpart.

“These people are our neighbors and family, or even us,” said Chikako Ida, a student at Kyushu Institute of Design. “We shouldn’t pretend it didn’t happen, and it is wrong to act like the refugees in Bet are frightening. What happened to them is terrifying, but we are safe, and have a duty to help.”

Jun Fuguda agrees. “I know there are trade restrictions, but for a charitable cause, they should be lifted. We know that Earth Bet exists, and we can’t leave them to suffer. What else can we do with this portal but help?”

- Wall Street Journal, November 6th, 1999

CROSS-DIMENSIONAL COLLABORATION? - Hollywood talks are heating up for a possible interdimensional crossover featuring two (yes, count ‘em!) Brad Pitts. This wouldn’t be the first Bet-Aleph co-production (*Confinement* and *Fifteen Letters* share that title, releasing in 1998) but it might just be the first to involve physical interaction between stars from different universes. The expense of interdimensional travel is legendary, but we think getting all that sex appeal in one is worth it!

- *PEOPLE* magazine, February 2000

ALEPH SHUTS DOWN TRADE - Following the wave of terror attacks that have spread across Europe in the wake of the appearance of the third Endbringer, Earth Aleph has indefinitely shut down physical trade. Officials from the Aleph U.S. Department of Commerce say that this is intended to be a temporary measure until details of the extent and method of dispersal of the mental contagion have been ascertained.

Critics from Earth Aleph, however, argue their exports are being unfairly affected and that this is posturing from Aleph’s United States to remind both dimensions of their control of interdimensional traffic.

Media transfer between Bet and Aleph through the internet, television, and radio will continue uninterrupted.

- Wall Street Journal, March 2003

I visit my childhood home on maps. I have a road atlas that my parents left behind in my car by mistake, now one of my most treasured possessions, and I have a small collection of outdated travel guides I've found in used-book stores. But mostly - like the rest of us - I've gone digital.

Loading websites hosted in Aleph still takes dial-up time. I doodle in a notebook while street view painfully resolves, one pixel at a time. My childhood home, built in 1985, is not visible in this version of Corner Brook, but the house down the street (built sometime in the seventies) is. I've never been able to determine if there's a rhyme or reason to the minute differences between our dimensions pre-contact. It's a whole field of study, I'm told. I wouldn't know - I don't even know how to tell which buildings were never built and which have simply been demolished in the intervening decades. With all but the highest peaks of Newfoundland underwater, the streets of my childhood only exist in my memories - unless they exist in Aleph.

Officially, I am not counted among the twenty-five thousand residents of Newfoundland and Labrador displaced by Leviathan. In 2005, I was just beginning summer term at Mount Allison University. The university waived my housing fees for summer; in September, I moved in with a friend. I was never homeless. I never slept in a shelter. I had been planning my whole life to leave.

My distance meant my survival, but it also meant a unique kind of pain.

I am old enough to remember a time before Endbringers, something my children will never know. In the first months after Leviathan's attack, I often forgot it had even happened. It was entirely unreal. I don't know how many times I thought about calling my parents as I walked home, only to remember their deaths like a missed step.

I never forgot finding the maps of Aleph. They were proof that mankind has one last safe place. They were proof that my childhood was real, something to point to and say: I used to live here.

- excerpt from *What the Living Do* by Sarah DeMont

ENDBRINGER REACHES ALEPH; 35 PRESUMED DEAD - 35 people are missing or dead in Madison, Wisconsin following yesterday's attack by the Endbringer 'Simurgh' on the city's Bet counterpart. The Endbringer utilized remnants of the device used to create the first and only permanent portal in Wapakoneta, Ohio, to access Earth Aleph once more, causing portions of two apartment buildings to fall through into Earth Bet.

"This is unprecedented behavior," said Chief Director Rebecca Costa-Brown of the Parahuman Response Team. "We have retrieved and destroyed all remaining pieces of Professor Haywire's technology that were not destroyed by Scion during the battle. We want to reassure citizens of both Bet and Aleph that there are no other known ways of creating cross-dimensional portals and that the portals created in Madison last afternoon dissipated and show no signs of re-emergence. There is no need to worry about contamination between dimensions."

President Bennett stated this morning that he was "unimpressed," by the PRT's response. "We on Aleph have devoted considerable resources to safeguarding our portal and the integrity of our dimension. Why did the PRT retain these devices, knowing the security risk they posed?"

His opinion was echoed in Madison, where mourners have taken to the streets despite a forecast of snow and ice.

"If this is what Bet thinks is acceptable, then we don't have the same definition of okay," said Crystina Bryant. "How can we ever feel safe in our homes again? It's like we're two different species."

- Associated Press, December 23rd, 2009

Traditional political science has been restricted by the inability to have true treatment and control groups. Direct equivalences between political situations are difficult to draw, due to the high number of confounding variables[14]. However, due to the advent of interdimensional communication, there has been growing interest in comparing and contrasting our political situation on Earth Aleph with Earth Bet, which proponents argue has the potential to reduce[7] the effect of cultural differences between comparison groups[24]. Prior work has highlighted the criticality of performing this work now[8], following the emergence of Endbringers[11] and other major geopolitical shifts[3].

However, we argue that this cultural divergence has already completed, and was in fact irreconcilable only a few years post-historical divergence, before first contact was made. Earth Aleph cannot be seen as a baseline or default; rather, Earth Bet has created its own distinct cultural environment. As parahuman populations rise on Earth Bet, we predict this cultural divergence will become a true cultural incompatibility that could lead to serious repercussions in international trade if not anticipated.

- *It Makes No Difference Abroad: Examining the Aleph-Bet Divergence in International Relations* by Sayid, S.[1], Hobnell, M.[1], Graham, A.[2], & Hoffman, R.[2]

[1] Columbia University, Department of Political Science (Aleph)

[2] Columbia University, Department of Political Science (Bet)

SECOND PORTAL TO BET OPENED - Following a battle with an unidentified parahuman force in Brockton Bay, a new portal between Earth Bet and Earth Aleph was opened through an accidental combination of parahuman powers, as confirmed by the authorities of Bet's Brockton Bay. The portal remained open for less than twenty minutes, but not before unidentified individuals believed to be involved parahumans passed through. Military forces were dispatched to the area, but no suspects have been apprehended.

The mayor of Brockton Bay, Stephanie Snyder, has urged citizens to remain "cautious, but calm." In a speech Tuesday morning, she addressed concerns that the alleged parahumans may have been associated with the burgeoning criminal population in Bet's Brockton Bay, saying that "local and state police, the military, and the National Guard are all maintaining a presence in the city and remaining on alert for any alien individuals, but we have had no reports of parahuman-involved violence. We are in constant communication with the officials in Earth Bet, and we are actively cooperating to make this difficult situation as easy as possible for all of us. If you see suspicious activity you suspect to be related to parahuman activity, please contact the city's hotline. There is currently no reason to suspect a recurrence of this incident."

Controversially, Representative Kate McCarthy has advocated to open negotiations with Bet for a permanent portal installation similar to Wapakoneta. Senator and presidential hopeful

Ramon Alvarez of New York voiced his disagreement and his support for hardline anti-portal measures, saying that, “We are not prepared to do business in a city overrun by superpowered criminals. We are especially not prepared for the access to our home dimension this portal gives to Bet’s so-called S-class threats. A look at flood level tables will tell you that this portal would have been underwater during Leviathan’s attack on the Bet Brockton Bay. What will we do if he attacks again? What will we do if the Simurgh attacks and opens another portal like she did in Madison? We have to anticipate the worst.”

- The Bay Bulletin, June 22nd, 2011

PORTAL TO BET CLOSED PERMANENTLY - After two months of negotiation, the parahuman Valkyrie permanently deactivated the portal in Wapakoneta, closing Aleph off from Bet permanently.

[...]

Wapakoneta emerged unscathed from the unprecedented interdimensional attack by the parahuman Scion, but has been overwhelmed by an influx of Bet refugees over the past month, leading to unrest among native residents. The sentiment was echoed by residents of Brockton Bay and the surrounding area, where a portal from Bet was briefly opened in 2011.

“How can we guarantee that they won’t reopen that portal?” asked one anonymous resident. “How do we know parahumans haven’t already come through from Bet?”

Another said, “Our first priority should be refugees from our own dimension. We have too much rebuilding to do worldwide to focus on handholding Bet residents who forced their way here.”

These attitudes have sparked a humanitarian movement to outlaw discrimination based on universe of origin, which has been met with support from the ACLU and the Association of Bet Refugees (ABR), an organization that represents residents of refugee camps throughout Ohio as they navigate the citizenship transfer process.

“Paranoia about refugees is standard xenophobia, exacerbated by how there is no practical way to deport people across dimensions without keeping the portal open and increasing the risk of a serious inter-dimensional conflict over access to our world. The asylum seekers already here are being detained and screened for corona pollentia in addition to mundane illnesses. The bigger threat is parahumans outside of Aleph,” said Harsh Sharma, a law professor at Ohio State University and ABR liaison. “Both previous portals were opened from Bet’s side. We can’t know we’re safe, now that we know that there are dozens of universes out there. We’re sealed off, sure - for now.”

- The Columbus Dispatch, December 11th, 2013

REC. 10/11/11 18:59 EST

Zip Your Lips

Director Frost of PRT Department Twenty-Eight starting interrogation of villain designated Burrow on the fifth of April two-thousand-twelve at fifteen hundred hours. Protectorate lead designated Wyvern will be standing in as a countermeasure and safety precaution. Burrow is detained through standard protocols for movers and brutes.

Papers shuffle and the sound of someone moving can be heard>

On the evening of the fifteenth of March you were involved in an incident leading to the deaths of no less than twenty-seven civilians and the injury of another five. Protectorate response was delayed by the villains Peck Dancer and Styrofoam, since apprehended and sentenced, leading to your escape as efforts turned to attempting to put out the fires and preventing further harm. Two weeks later you were involved in another incident, this one leading to hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of property damage and theft where you narrowly avoided capture by Floatzone and Icarus. Today you were involved in yet another incident that led to the death of Quill, a hero who's done more good for this city than I have the time to outline, leading to your immediate capture at the hands of Wyvern while the villain you were fighting escaped in the chaos, who we are led to believe was Gyropic based on witness reports.
Silence

What do you have to say in your defense?

Quill wasn't supposed to die.

Well he sure as shit did. And you did it. Now, the only reason you're here and not in a cell is because I have one question for you.

Well get on with it, then.

Why? Why have you been escalating? What changed to turn you into a murderer, Burrow?

Silence.

Something hard can be heard hitting the table.

Calm down, Wyvern. Talking is the only chance you have to avoid the Cage. If helping prevent this from happening again to someone else isn't motivation enough, then maybe self preservation will get an answer out of you.

I needed money and reputation, alright? Can't stay small time forever without getting killed or worse eventually, y'know? I was tired of being a small fish in a big pond, so I got involved with some websites that circulate sometimes. Y'know how you heroes have that Whitelist site? There's opposites. Like, I don't know how you don't know about them yourself. But there's many cause they're always being shut down and shit.

And you took jobs from them.

Yeah. Fight some villains and make it look flashy, rob this place for this item on this day, beat up this guy for being a prick. But to advance required doing more each time. Getting more profile and points and everything.

Why'd you keep going?

Didn't seem like it was too deep, man, I don't know. I got a niece who needs surgery; what would you do? Chance at making actual fucking money? What did it matter if some people got a little roughed up if it meant I could front those bills for my sis.

You did more than rough up people. Even before Quill.

Yeah, well, things got out of control. It's not like this was all staged. It was just set up a little. It's not like I wanted to go all out, but Cascade wasn't pulling punches. It's not my fault.

There's a crashing sound followed by debris falling onto tile

You're testing our collective patience, Burrow.

It doesn't matter what I say. You're just using me for info before you throw me into that deathtrap.

We could've worked something out, but you don't have an ounce of remorse for your actions.

Don't bullshit me, suit.

An audible sigh.

If there's one thing I don't do, it's bullshit people. Last chance, Burrow. Give me something to work with here.

Inaudible reply

Alright, fine. Wyvern, get Dragon on the line to set up a transport—

You're killing my niece if you send me away.

And you're killing dozens on top of the ones you've already murdered by not helping us.

So it's an eye for an eye, eh?

It's making the best of a terrible situation

...I want my niece's surgery covered.

You're not in a position to be making demands

That's where you're wrong, Wyvern. I have information that you don't. That neither of you have.

Well, you've yet to say anything we didn't already know, Burrow. And my patience is long gone.

There's the sound of bodies moving and a growl of protest from Burrow.

Listen here. I'm done playing nice. Either you give us the info or you're going to the cage immediately. Niece or no niece, you've ruined enough lives! You have until I hit zero. 5...4...3...2…

Jesus Christ give me a second! This is huge! Okay, look, I was on that damn Blacklist because that was what I was told to, okay? Fuck, they're going to kill me.

...Who's going to kill you?

Them! The ones who gave me my powers. You have no idea how much it cost me. How many favors I've been having to do. But I had to! For Jessica. Do you know how expensive chemo is? How much it sucks out of your life watching a little kid go from being a ray of sunshine to barely being able to walk? Watching her stop caring about hair styles because she lost it all? DO YOU

The sound of heavy breathing fills the room.

I tried. I did everything I could do and it wasn't enough. She was on borrowed time, so I did what needed to be done. I went looking. Searching. For any way to save her at any cost. And that's when they found me.

You still haven't told us who 'they' are.

All these fake sites for powers. Stupid superstition. People arguing on forums about what makes people get them, what kind of powers you can or can't get. So many dead ends. And then I got an email. I wanted powers and they could give me them, for a price. And I would pay any price if it meant a chance at saving my niece.

So you...bought powers?

Ha, yeah, I couldn't believe it even as I went through their stupid testing. Portals and shit, man, I don't even know. Some vial, tasted like hell collapsed in my throat, things went crazy, and that was that. I owed them. My life was theirs, really, whenever they wanted. And they wanted me to make a name for myself. So I tried. I made money, I started hacking at the medical debt. I fought and fought and fought and then a letter showed up on my bed when I put my coat up one night. Just bam, suddenly there. Join the Blacklist, it said, get serious. Or else. I don't know what they wanted from me, what their end goal was, but they pushed me.

That's a pretty wild story. What makes you think we're going to believe it?

Because you have to. Just like I had to. They told me that he had to die. That there was a Whitelist and a Blacklist event that was going to collide and I would be involved. And that I had to kill him. Or my contract was void and they'd take my powers away. Or kill me, maybe. I couldn't—I had to do it. It's the only way that Jessica can get her treatments, you fucks!

The sound of the door lock can be heard clicking, followed by stuttering from Burrow

So the rumors are true.

I need to contact Uppercrust. Take care of the loose end.

What—But—You bastards!

A whirring noise drowns out all other sounds except the screams.

Take care of the body. I'll make sure no one's around for the transport, and then we can report.

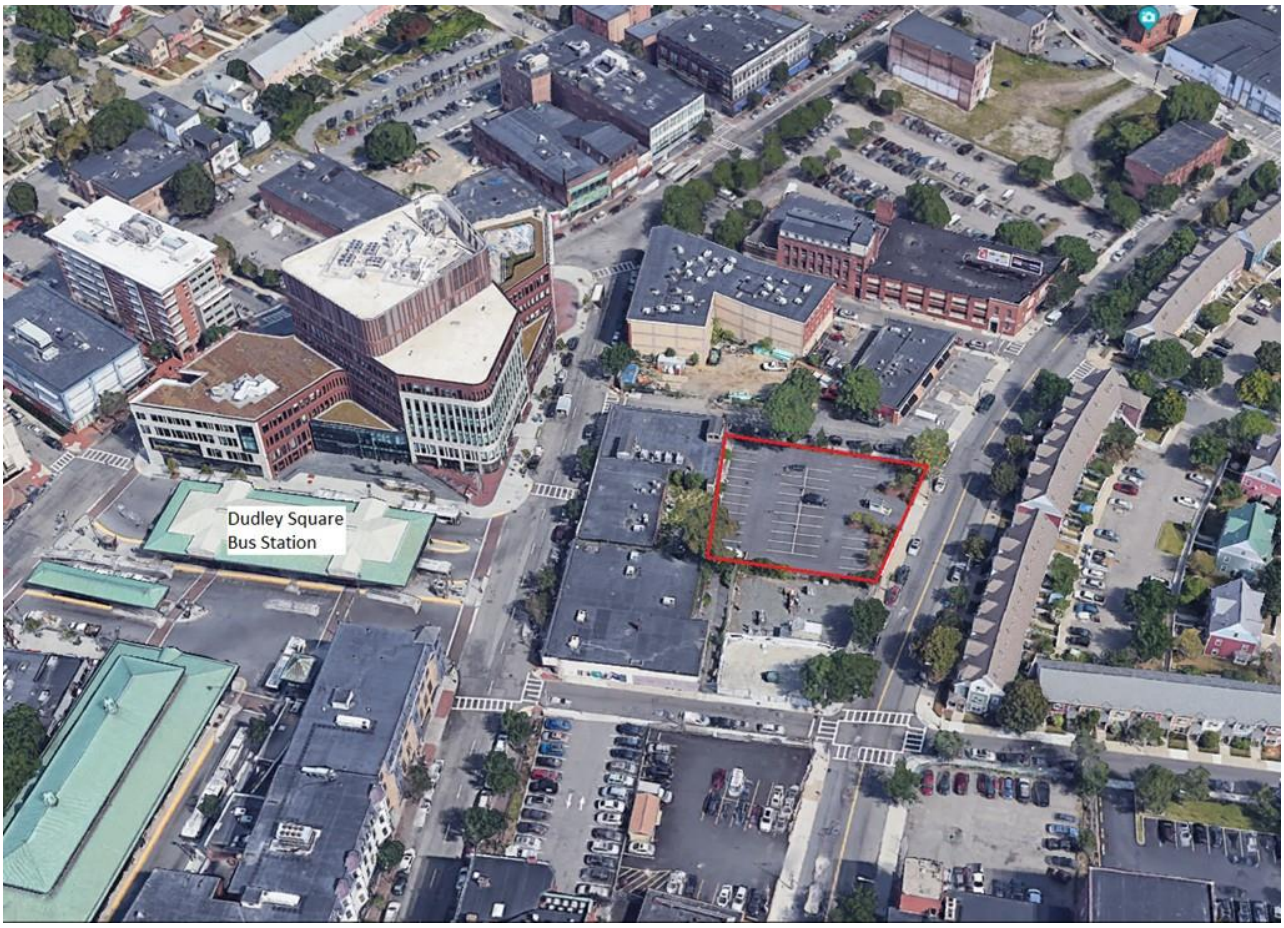
Of course. Didn't expect the interrogation would turn out this way. Do you think—What the f—>

Several gunshots ring out, followed by two thuds, and then silence.

TIME
The man, the myth
LEGEND

ONE HELLISH NIGHT

Destruction Visits Roxbury



Cape fights are a commonly accepted fact of life. They happen, they have happened, and they will continue to happen. In this cape-dominated society, we have acknowledged, by and large, that people with powers walk among us, and they are more than happy to use their gifts and curses for good or ill. Most people, however, don't think that any tragedy involving these individuals could ever befall them.

Pictured: Where the fighting was presumed to have started. Picture obtained from the city of Boston and editing was done by the Boston Globe.

On Sunday night, at 10:24 PM, that all changed for 64 year old Roxbury resident, Rosalind Rupert as a cape fight took all that she had ever known, including her life. The fight spiralled rapidly out of control, beginning early in the evening and turning into a maelstrom of death and destruction that ravaged the Boston suburb. The fight, according to PRT sources, was between the well known villain 'Chain Man', and a currently unknown second cape. The pair locked horns over an unknown dispute that began in the Commons and turned into a rapid, high-octane chase that ended in calamitous conclusion in Roxbury that left four dead and eighteen injured. Witnesses state that the suburb of Boston was first split and flayed by all manners of edged weapons, ranging from razors to machetes attached to chains that held little regard for civilian casualties and then the streets were summarily flash-frozen by a streak of blue that wound through its streets.

Pictured: PRT Director Kamil Armstrong at the inauguration of Boston's newest Ward, Cacophony. Photo taken on October 16th, 2006. Director Armstrong had no comments pertaining to the crisis in Roxbury.

[...]a regular modern-day Caligula. Maybe next time he can order his posse of ****heads to go stab the river and congratulate himself on the news

-@SNOOSYPRTY

The PRT officially responded later that night, citing logistical troubles for their inability to contain the fighting. Protectorate heroes Bastion and Dovetail did not manage to respond until midnight, well after the fighting had stopped and both parahumans had fled the area. When asked for comments, both senior heroes declined.

Denizens of Roxbury, however, were disquieted by the violence.

"It never reaches here," commented 23 year old resident Michael Brownman. "The fights should never reach here. There's nothing to fight over here. We're a nobody neighborhood in this city." Mr. Brownman's apartment was destroyed as a result of the fighting, one of the luckier ones, some would say.

"It's not just the people getting hurt, it's also the places they destroy. They wrecked the apothecary. The next closest one is an hour away in Chinatown and I can't leave my mom alone in the house for that long," said 18 year old local Isaiah Ng.

"I bet if this was the South End they'd have been there in a minute. We didn't even see so much as a ****ing SWAT van out here while the streets blew up. They don't give a **** about us out here," added a third source from the ground, who has asked to remain anonymous.

The three commenters are not the only ones to have their lives disrupted by the violence and lack of response from the PRT, as part of the fighting also took place inside the Roxbury Community College, resulting in eight days of suspended classes as the school works to remove debris and to build temporary classrooms for the ones destroyed. PRT Director Kamil Armstrong has pledged funding and manpower to assist in the recovery and rebuilding efforts. The PRT Director, who has been criticized before of being too lenient of capes—villain or hero—when they run rampant, was similarly criticized again on social media and alternative media platforms for his inefficacy in dealing with the initial violence. A commenter known as 'snoosyprty' on popular social media platform Twitter commented that the Director seemed to be "a regular modern-day Caligula. Maybe next time he can order his posse of ****heads to go stab the river and congratulate himself on the news".

The office of the Director did not respond to questions when the Boston Globe reached out.

OPINION: IT'S TIME THE PRT TOOK THEIR JOBS SERIOUSLY

By: Regan Rupert

There is a distinct flavor and tone that most Americans take on when talking about the now household name Parahuman Response Team. They're seen as the police above the police. The ones that serve and protect the masses against society's more villainously inclined superhumans. The notes that trill from their media parakeets in golden gilded cages is sweet and honeyed, one that forgives and forgets any woes and foibles the monolithic government agency can possibly commit. This is a very dangerous precedent.

When a government body fails to do its job, we must not fail in our duty as citizens to speak up and demand answers for their failings. This is not just about the Roxbury incident covered in the front page article, but also about the flurry of other stories of their lackadaisical responses to parahuman conflicts in the suburbs or in states that have no official PRT office that the PRT have tried so desperately to cover up.

We can name names: Doppler and Nuka squaring off in Worcester, Synthetic threatening the town hall of Stoughton, a three way fight between the Elite, Accord's Ambassadors, and the late independent hero Minuteman in Springfield, parahuman pirates off the coast of Provincetown, Wise Man declaring himself the ruler of Warwick, an estimated seven hundred thousand dollars of property damage courtesy of a Ward getting drunk in Woonsocket, and Attleboro. All these towns have had conflicts involving capes which resulted in tragic loss of property, resources, and life and

Why the hell are we funding them?

The PRT as of 2006's budget report cost American taxpayers approximately three hundred billion dollars to maintain as an agency. That is more than the CIA, FBI, and NASA combined. I understand what people will say—that that is a budget for the organization as a whole, for the entire country, except that is still not an excuse for ridiculous over expenditure for an organization that has remained stagnant and unable to actually do their duty; that being the policing of parahumans and parahuman crime. It is anathema to the taxpayer that an agency as monolithic as one that can challenge the logistical structure of the military to be this inefficient in doing their jobs. Either the PRT needs to have their funding reined in or they need to be dissolved, and whatever the American public decides it is something that must be done sooner rather than later. The sloth of the public is detrimental to meaningful reform.

Of course I understand how difficult it is to dissolve the PRT, for Milton Friedman was right—nothing is so permanent as a temporary government program. I am not arguing for full dissolution of the agency, but only for more oversight as insurance for them to do their jobs, something that has become eminently evident in the light of more and more distress caused by parahumans that the PRT fail to contain, or integrate, as their mission statement claims.

Boston and more importantly the country needs a stronger hand to weather these crises and more, and I am of the opinion neither Director Armstrong nor the PRT at large are capable of handling it.

5

CAPECON

AUGUST 12-19

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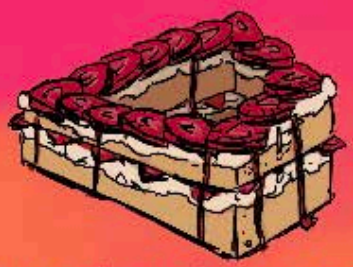


Interdimensional cake

Tinker-grown gummies

AND MORE!

Capecon is a fan-run convention organized by Parahumans Online in association with the PRT.

Nov. 14th, 2001

The Colts have a chance. They'll have a tough few games over the next few weeks, but they can do it, they can win! This is our year! Jay and Brandon don't think the Colts will pull through for me, but they both like the Patriots, so their opinion doesn't matter.

Mom and Dad have been bugging Abby about being safe. Again. It's just like, why? They know she'll just ignore them, so what's even the point. And then she comes to me to complain about them!

F O R H O U R S

She did give me a cool looking crystal thing. Said it came from the power of some failure of a thrift shop supervillain, but I think it just came from a thrift shop. After all, if she wouldn't even get her partner to let me try out his invisibility cloak, why would she give me the potentially dangerous remains of a bad guy's power?

And she thinks I'm the gullible one.

Class has been the same as always. Fuck calculus.

That's pretty much it.

Nov. 27th, 2001

Abby told me that her and her team are going to participate in an Endbringer fight. Cause they feel obligated to or something. Which they aren't. They don't have to. I really doubt that they want to. No one would. But they are. They are idiots.

The Colts can still make the playoffs, but let things get too close for comfort in the last game. They just gotta get through the next couple of games. I have faith in them, they'll pull through for me.

No, they aren't just idiots, they are worse than idiots. Cause they know better. If Mom and Dad find out, which they won't from me cause I am in fact not an idiot who will make things worse by doing stupid things. But if they knew, they'd ground her for life. College, teammates, or super powers? Wouldn't matter to them.

But that would just make things worse. So I'm stuck.

She's smart enough to not get herself killed, so it doesn't really matter probably.

Have to work on a group project for physics class, but at least I was able to get Jay in my group, and he knows what he's doing in the class. Unlike the rest of us, but that's on the teacher for not actually explaining anything.

That's all for now.

Dec. 1st, 2001

She got hurt in a fight, not badly or anything, just bruises and scrapes she said, and it's not the first time that she's been hurt. It's far from the first time that she hid or downplayed injuries to Mom and Dad, but like, it's different?

It's not really about the Endbringer thing, I have made my peace with that, but she is supposed to be a superhero and all that stuff. Saving people and fighting monsters of the week. And even superheroes get hurt, but she isn't like those superheroes. Or she just doesn't seem like them cause she gets hurt, but acts like she won't, and always brushes it off.

That's fine and all, it's her life and she isn't stupid, but then she tells me about getting hurt like it is common, and it is, but there is a big difference between stubbing a toe and getting hit in the ribs with a crowbar. She acts like there isn't. And Mom and Dad don't know nearly everything, but I do. When they talk about how she needs to be more cautious and safe, which they keep doing to the point of insanity, like you two have said everything that you could so why do you keep going on and on about it?

I kinda wish that she would stop talking to me about superhero stuff. Heroes are cool enough to see on TV and online sometimes, but in reality they just talk about boring stuff and crazy stuff. Or maybe that is just her. I get that it's nice to have a family member who you don't hide half of your life from, but then I have to hide half of your life too, and who I am supposed to talk to about it?

It's just, whatever.

That's all.

Dec. 6th, 2001

Behemoth is attacking Lagos, Nigeria. Abby called me right before she left and said that she would be fine. She also said to try to keep Mom and Dad from watching the news about the attack. Just in case.

They haven't watched the news since she became a hero. I didn't tell her that though, instead I said, "Kay." I wasn't thinking straight and all I could say was a letter. Not, "Good luck" or "Be safe." And now I don't know if that is going to be the last thing that I say to my sister before she dies.

I thought writing in this would help. At least take up enough time for the fight to end so I can know if Abby is alright.

It's only been 4 minutes since she called.

I hope she's alright.

Dec. 12th, 2001

The Colts have tragically lost their chance at the Superbowl. Jay and Brandon teased me about it for a few days, but those jackasses will see, they'll all see. Next year, we'll be bringing back the trophy.

Newtowne Subs closed the other week which kinda sucks. I didn't think the food was anything special, but Dad liked to go there. Hopefully this will mean we won't go out for Italian as much, but I'm not sure Dad trying to cook pasta would be much better.

Abby also told Mom and Dad about the Endbringer fight the other day. Properly told them that is. When she came back and they saw her broken arm, everything sort of came spilling out. They didn't talk much about it that night, what with everything that had happened. When she told them again over dinner the other night, everything was more calm. It was a rather tense dinner, but it felt nice. Mom and Dad aren't quite happy, but it wasn't as bad as me and Abby had feared.

Everything has been pretty quiet, which is nice. The holidays are coming up and I'm pretty excited for it. By the end of the month I'll be sick to death of watching "classic" movies again and again, but eh.

Looking forward to it.

Class is how it always is. Fuck chemistry.

That's pretty much it.

Trigger warning: This work contains depictions of misogyny and graphic violence.

Thug

"Glory Girl? Seriously?"

"What? You saying you wouldn't hit that if you had the chance?

In the courtyard of two towering housing complexes were two young men. They should have been at school making up for failed years, but instead they were sitting atop a park table, their feet resting on the bench seat.

One had the beginnings of a mustache and goatee, faint wisps of scraggly hair. He went by the name of Van and he had to admit he probably would sleep with Glory Girl.

"I mean, I guess."

He knew he never would, of course.

"Right?" said the other young man, grinning. The stockier, and bigger of the two, he was called Wayman. "You see some of the pictures she posts online? She knows exactly what she's doing."

Van snorted. "Yeah? What's that?"

"What, you haven't seen her feed? She's a total tease. There's this one picture, she does a little eye-rolling, a little lip-smacking action. Aw, she's a fucking show-off."

Van scoffed. "You're full of it."

"Here." Wayman pulled out his phone. "Check it."

With a precursory eye roll, Van checked it. He scoffed again, louder than before. "She's just having some ice cream, dude."

"Well, yeah, but look at her!" Wayman shook his phone for emphasis. "She *wants* it." Van blew out his lips.

"Yeah, sure. Keep dreaming. That's a whole other world." Wayman sucked his teeth in and put away his phone.

"Whatever, man."

The two sat in silence for a moment. On the subject of girls, Van's thoughts drifted to Yumi, the cute girl who was working at Fugly Bob's. He had gotten to talking to her a few weeks back, found out she attended his old church, and suddenly he had a reason to be pious again. Van had enlisted the help of his grandma who was more than happy to play along and now he, his grandma and Yumi were set to go to church together next Sunday. It was not quite a date, but if it meant spending time with Yumi, Van was prepared to endure however many hours of sermon he needed to.

He had a smile on his face when the first customer of the day arrived.

"Hey," said a skinny white guy. He had his hands deep in his pockets as if they might be stained and he looked over his shoulder twice in the time it took Van to

reply "Hey" back.

"What you looking for?" asked Wayman.

"Yeah, uh," said the white guy, shifting from foot to foot. "You got any pills? Something for a trip?"

"You want something psychedelic?" asked Wayman.

The white guy smiled at that word. "Yeah, yeah, exactly. Something cool."

"We got something," Wayman said. "$30 for a pair. Take one and you'll be tripping the whole day. Real good time."

"Yeah, that's perfect. I'll take it."

"Let's see the money, then."

White guy pulled his hands out of his pockets and came up with three twenties. "Gimme four," he said as if Wayman and Van couldn't do basic fucking math. Van didn't take it personally and got the acid tabs out from his jacket. They were individually sealed, but paired off by a tear line.

As Wayman took the white guy's money, Van handed the acid over.

However, the white guy frowned at what he had gotten. "These aren't pills," he said.

"They're tabs," said Wayman. "Put them under your tongue, let them melt, enjoy. It ain't complicated."

"Oh," said the white guy, still a little uncertain.

"What?" asked Wayman, danger rising in his voice. "You got a problem with that?" White guy flinched and held up his hands. "No, no, it's fine. Thanks. I'll go now." And off he went, scurrying away like he had just shit his pants.

"Fucker," Wayman muttered under his breath.

Van just shook his head. “Man, you gotta ease up a bit.”

“What?”

“Ease. Up,” said Van. “Not going to have any customers if you scare’em all off.”

“What are you on about?” Wayman said, scowling. “That guy was trying to pull some shit. If you let’em whine too long, they’ll start thinking they can boss you around, asking for refunds and shit. If you don’t set’em straight, they’ll fuck with you.”

Van rolled his eyes, but didn’t argue. He had been friends with Wayman since middle school, and as good as Wayman was to have in a fight, he was just as bull-headed about everything else. “Alright, whatever.”

Wayman gave him a look, but didn’t make any more of it.

As the two waited for their next customer, Van’s thoughts stretched back to Yumi. She would be working right about now. Pressed and buttoned into a Fugly Bob’s uniform, her hair tied and pulled back under the red cap that she was required to

wear. It wasn't a good look, but somehow Yumi made it work.

Van was going to have some money soon, enough to buy a moped maybe. He might be able to get Yumi to ride with him. He had heard her saying she wanted to go visit the beach sometime and if he had a ride, she might actually say yes if he asked. Van smiled at the thought of her wrapping her arms around him as they cruised by the ocean.

As Van daydreamed, the second customer of the day arrived.

She was pretty, but not in the way Yumi was. Her hair was black and laid straight back, she wore a puffy jacket, over large on her tiny frame, and there was not an ounce of hesitation to her.

Regardless of being a Glory Girl fan, Wayman sat up a little straighter at the sight of her. "Hey," he said, trying to sound smooth, "you looking for something?"

The girl stopped before them, looked at each of them with silent judgement before finally answering. "Yeah. Your boss."

Van and Wayman shared a look.

"Er," said Van, "who exactly do you think that is?"

The girl scowled. "Lung, *obviously*. Are you going to gawk at me all day or are you going to get him or not?"

Another moment of shock went through the pair of dealers and it was Wayman who found his tongue first. "W*hat the fuck*. Who the hell do you think you are?"

“You don’t recognize me?” asked the girl.

“*No*. Am I supposed to?”

“You don’t watch the news very much, do you,” said the girl. She put her fingers to her eyes and just when Van was thinking she was poking them out, she pulled them away to reveal a pair of contacts. Colored contacts that gave her black irises. Without them, her eyes were a shocking blue. It was a strange color to see on an Asian girl and it set Van off-balance. Shouldn’t the colors have been the other way around?

“Still don’t recognize me?” she said, sneering now.

Wayman scoffed. “*Again*, no, I don’t. You supposed to be some sort of famous whore or something? The Blue-Eyed Bi—“

The girl flicked her fingers and the contacts flew off them.
One landed on Wayman’s pants leg, the other landed on his cheek. The girl clicked her tongue twice and a pair of *pops* matched them.

Van jumped and nearly fell from his perch. Gunshots were his first thought; the Empire must’ve decided to finally move in on their territory. But before he could scramble for cover, a blood-curdling scream erupted from his partner.

Wayman flailed wildly, hands clutching his face and he flopped off the park table where they had set up shop. He hit the ground and rolled until he was on his back, and finally, Van saw what was causing his friend such agony.

Two walnut-sized holes had been carved out of Wayman's flesh. One in his right thigh, the other on his face, exposing his teeth from the side of his cheek. Blood poured out from the openings and with all Wayman's thrashing, it gushed even worse.

"Tch. That was way too small." The girl scowled. "Should've laced more compound in the silicone."

Van blinked, and looked at her. His heart was racing and his mind was fuzzy with adrenaline, but his body wouldn't move. He was fixed in place, unable to form a thought or generate even a reflexive impulse.

"Hey," said the girl and Van froze even more than he already had, not even breathing. "*Hey*!" she yelled and this time Van had to answer.

On the ground, Wayman's screams had quieted to low aching moans.

"Y-yeah?" said Van.

"Can you call your fucking boss now?"

"Uh," said Van.

"Or I could just explode your face off and find someone else," said the girl with a sneer.

"No, no, I'll call him, I'll call him!" Van jammed his hands into his pockets and fished his phone out with such force that it nearly flew across the courtyard. He managed to get the phone around and with trembling hands started to dial…

Well, it wasn't like Van had Lung's number. Or Oni Lee's for that matter.

"Well?" asked the girl. "What's the hold-up?"

Van swallowed, his mouth painfully dry. "Just uh… just a second."

The closest thing to a boss Van had was a man by the name of Tong. A mean bastard who liked to chew on cigars and chew out newbies. Calling him was just asking for a beating. In this situation, though, not calling him was asking to get killed.

Wayman groaned. He was no longer rolling around, his hands covered his face as if he was crying. If he was, there would be no way to tell the tears from the red.

Van dialed Tong and the girl watched him dispassionately. She raised a hand — Van's heart nearly stopped — but all she did was put her finger in her ear and dig out some wax. She flicked the extract off over Wayman's body and for a moment Van worried that that too might explode.

The call connected before he found out.

"Yeah? Who is this?"

The gruff voice of Tong would've terrified Van any other time, but now all he felt was relief. "It's Van. Van down at the Dale towers."

"Yeah?"

"Yes!" cried Van. "Look, you got to bring Lung down here. It's really important!"

"The fuck? You think you can just— "

"There's someone here who wants to see him!" Across from him, the girl smiled. Van’s guts clenched.

"Who?" asked Tong, curt as ever.

"It's uh… it's…" Van looked to the girl. "Who should I say you are?"

Blue eyes gleamed as the girl’s smile turned into a grin, manic and wild, stretching from ear to ear like they were pulled back by string.

"Bakuda," she said.

"Bakuda…” Van repeated. He took a shuddering breath. “I… I think she's a cape." Tong’s one word response was all Van needed to know he was right:

"Shit." Tong hung up.

Van didn’t register it at first. The dial tone stretched on like flatlining life support and all Van could think about was Yumi. Smart, pretty Yumi with her whole future set out before her. She was going to make it out of this hellhole. She had to. She was going to work her way up and into college, graduate with honors and awards and whatever other shit they gave the good students. She was going to get out of Brockton Bay, be one of those model refugee stories the church people liked to parade around.

Wayman moaned, reminding Van that yes, he was alive, yes, he was in horrible pain, and that yes, Van was next.

"Well?" Bakuda said, "what did your boss say?"

Van swallowed hard, and it was in that moment he found his one chance at survival. "He's coming," Van said, not lying, but praying, "fifteen minutes or so. Says he wants to talk. Peacefully."

"Hmm…" hummed Bakuda. "Alright, I guess I can wait."

She stepped over Wayman's still twitching body and hopped up onto the park table to sit beside Van. Close enough that Van could reach over and hug her… or strangle her.

"So you been in Brockton Bay long?" asked Bakuda.

Van stared. Bakuda sat with her legs crossed, relaxed like she was out at a barbecue.

"Seems like a nice place," she went on. "Fresh ocean breeze, comfortable climate, and from what I hear a really *popping* nightlife."

She shot Van a smirk, but when he didn't smile back, her expression dropped into a scowl. "Get it?"

"Ha," said Van, somewhat strangled. "Ha, ha, ha. Yeah. Popping." He forced on a smile. "Funny."

Bakuda rolled her eyes. "Don't patronize me. Or if you do, at least be more convincing about it." She threw a hand over her eyes, a dramatic flourish. "God, I hope the rest of the ABB aren't as dull as you and your friend."

At the mention of his friend, Van glanced again at Wayman. The twitching had stopped. Wayman lay there on the ground, motionless.

"Once I kill Lung and take control of the ABB, I'll have to whip the whole lot of you into shape. Really set things straight. Maybe I'll wipe those Nazis out just to set an example." She paused. "Or I could just bomb a few hospitals, that'd probably be easier. Well, it doesn't really matter. I'll have this city under my thumb shortly and then I can move onto the *real* big league."

Bakuda looked off into the distance, her manic daydreams outpacing her own voice.

Van didn't mind because so long as Bakuda was thinking of the future, she wasn't thinking about killing him. He sat, back stiff and hands clenched like a student facing expulsion. He had lied about Lung's arrival, but it couldn't have been much of a lie, could it? Bakuda had shown up on ABB territory and killed one of their own. Lung couldn't let that stand, could he? He had to answer back. He had to protect his people.

Swirling desperate thoughts filled Van's head. He imagined running or begging or even fighting, but each time, all Van could see at the end of each scenario was the cold lifeless body of his friend, Wayman.

Van’s thoughts started to turn to higher powers. God, Jesus, Buddha, whatever

there was, Van needed it. He didn't want to die here, not like this.

And it was then that Van saw his salvation.
A massive black Hummer almost too big for the street approached the courtyard, looking more like a tank than an automobile. It was Lung's car. The Air Force One of the ABB. Van had only seen it once before, not even the man inside, but that had been enough for Van to get the message. This was not a man to be fucked with.

Bakuda perked up at the sight of it. "Ah, so he arrives."

Van nearly sobbed. He might actually live through this.

The Hummer pulled to a stop, still some distance away, but clearly in view. The windows were tinted black, too dark to look through, but it had to be Lung in there. Van strained to see more, to see some sign of his leader. Where was Lung? Why hadn't he come out yet?

"Ugh," Bakuda groaned, "what's taking him so lo— "

Bakuda whirled around in the other direction, her eyes snapping wide open.

On the other side of the courtyard, having just walked out from behind one of the project towers, was Lung. He was shirtless as he usually was, six foot tall, as solidly built as his Hummer, and wearing the iron mask of his namesake. He wasted no time on words and sucked in a breath as if he was preparing to blow a house down. Or burn it down with his breath.

But that couldn't be right. Van blinked, feeling time slow to a crawl. Van was right

next to Bakuda. In the line of fire, so to speak. Lung couldn't be attacking. Not like this. Not with Van there.

The fire bloomed out from Lung like a flower. A swirl of reds, oranges, yellows and whites. A beautiful bouquet that filled the world inch by inch, blotting everything out until there was nothing left but the roaring flames.

Van didn't even have time to scream.

Daylight stung Van awake. He opened his eyes, a long, laborious effort that felt like he was peeling tape off. The world opened fraction by fraction until finally Van saw where he was.

A hospital room. Van inhaled, coughed and opened his eyes a little wider.

More than just a hospital, this was a *nice* hospital. The tiled floor was polished to a gleam and the window by his bedside faced a flowery garden. His bed and all the machines hooked up to him looked brand new.

Van wondered just how much this was all going to cost him. He winced at the thought and just like that, pain washed over him like hot oil. Van writhed for a moment, until his brain figured out that the moving was what was making him hurt. With gritted teeth, Van stilled himself until the burning across his body faded.

He was covered in burns, every inch of skin raw and pink, but as Van surveyed the damage, he had the thought that this wasn't so bad. For how much fire had

surrounded him, he had only been scalded, nothing too…

Van's eyes fell on his right arm, and he only saw the stem of a black limb, swallowed by white bandages. There was no feeling there. Not even pain.

Before he could consider what that meant — what he *was* now — there was a rattle at the door.

Van sat up, ignoring the sting that went with movement, his first thought going to Yumi. He half-feared, half-hoped that she had come. He didn't want to be seen like this, burned and broken, but at the same time, he longed to look at her. To maybe feel something other than agony.

The door opened and Tong stepped into the room. Van's heavyset kind-of boss looked out of place in the sterile hospital room, a walking antithesis of good health. He glanced at Van with beady eyes, before looking away. Clearing his throat, he shuffled closer.

"Hey," said Tong. "It is me. Tong."

If it was weird to see Tong without a cigar, it was weirder to see him so meek.
"H… hey," Van managed to say.

Tong forced on a smile, tight-lipped. He held it past the point of comfortable. Then with another rough clearing of the throat, he went on. "You were friends with the other boy, yes? Hui-min?"

"Wayman?" Van blinked. "Yes! Yes, I— augh!" Van sat back in the bed and let out a staggered breath. "I… yeah. How is he?"

“Ah,” said Tong. “Dead.”

Dead. Tong’s flat voice echoed in Van’s head. He had already known Wayman’s chances were slim. Van was pretty sure his friend had bled out right in front of him. But at the same time, his own miraculous recovery had given him a sliver of hope. Maybe Wayman had made it out, too. Maybe his friend had been still alive.

“It is… very unfortunate,” said Tong. He paused. “Do you know his family?”

“I… yeah, I do.”

“Ah, good.” Tong reached into his pocket and pulled out a thick roll of hundred dollar bills. “You give this to them, okay? Tell them, the ABB is sorry for their loss.” He paused again and then in a lower voice. “You tell them that the Merchants did this.”

“*What*?”

“A gang of Merchants. They cornered you and your friend and set you on fire. Do you understand?”

“The fuck!” cried Van, ignoring the resonating throb from his raised voice. “What are you talking about? It was that bitch! Bakuda!”

Tong frowned. The expression Van was most familiar with on the man. “You are mistaken. The Merchants did this. Bakuda is now a member of the ABB, a loyal subordinate. She is one of us now.”

Van stared, mouth open, and for a moment he forgot how much he hurt. He looked away from Tong. It hadn’t just been Bakuda’s fault.

“And Lung,” he whispered. “That motherfucker… that piece of shit! He blew me up! I was right there and he—“

A meaty hand wrapped around Van’s throat and pinned him to the back of the bed. A squeak passed through Van’s lips and all the burns on his body flared again.

“You. Are. Mistaken,” growled Tong. “It was the Merchants, understand?”

“I… ah…”

Tong’s hand squeezed. “Understand?”

“Y-yes. It was… Merchants.”

“Good.” Tong let go and Van gasped to catch his breath. Tong went on as if nothing had happened. “It is very unfortunate what happened to you and your friend, but the ABB takes care of its own.” He held up the roll of cash and put it on the table next to Van’s bed. “You give this to your friend’s family. You tell them that it was the Merchants.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out two more rolls of cash. “And these are for you.” He set the money down. The most money Van had ever seen at once. Tong went on, “It will be hard for you with your injuries, you will not be able to work as one usually does. But you are a part of the ABB. We will take care of you.”

That was too much. Van laughed. “Is that fucking so?”

Tong didn’t even blink. “Yes. What happened… was unfortunate. But we have an understanding, yes?”

It was all bullshit. Van's jaw clenched, and again he had to ignore the swell of accompanying pain. He ought to walk out on the fuckers. The ABB was no family, no brotherhood. Van was just another pawn on the chessboard.

He thought of Yumi. He could go to her. Run away together to wherever would take them. Whatever promising future she had, maybe, just maybe he could be a part of it, too.

Tong cleared his throat. He was the one in the room right now.

"Do you understand?" he asked again.

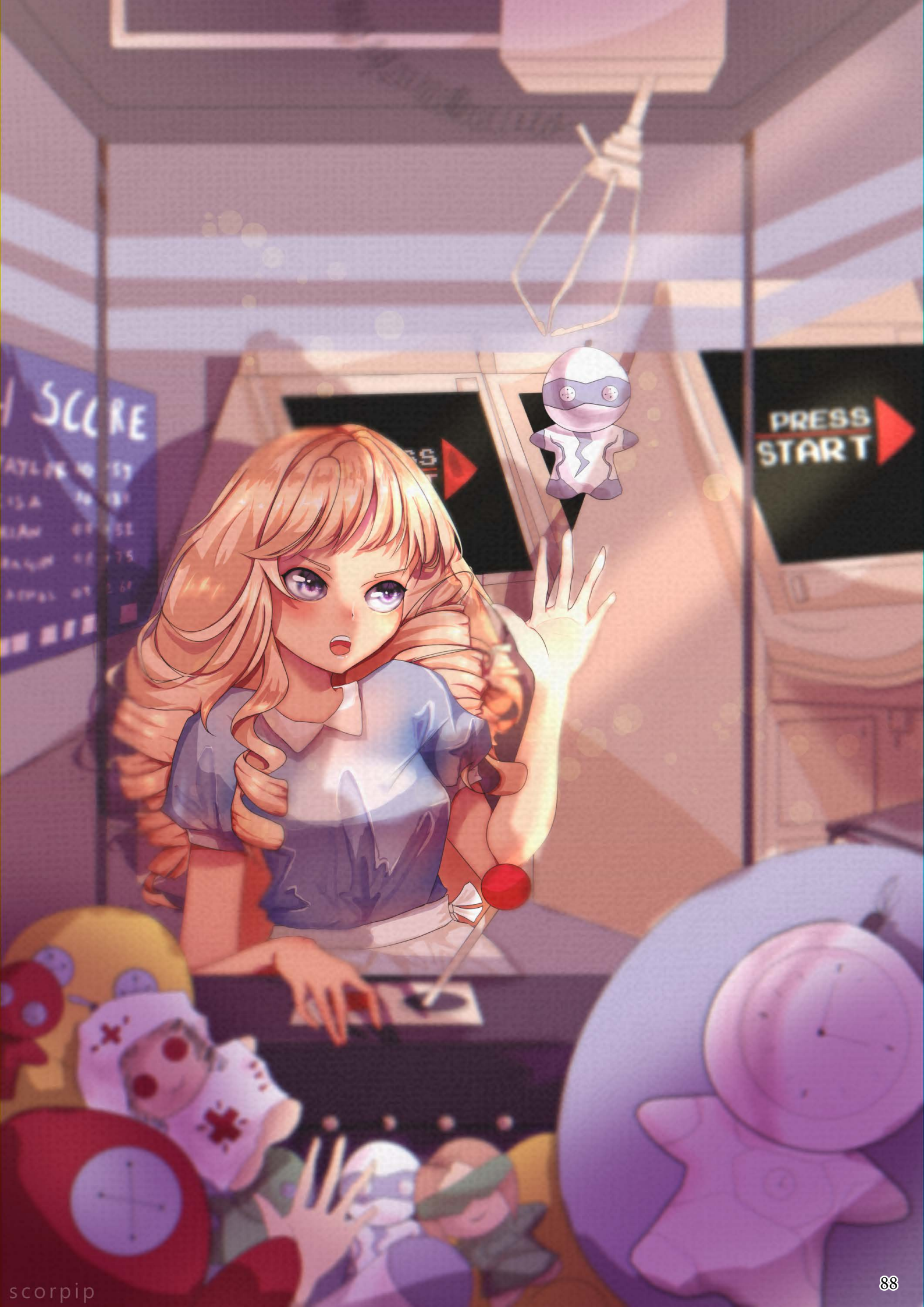
Van looked away. At his bedside were the two rolls of cash, tightly wound and packed together. Enough to buy a moped and have plenty left over.

This time, Tong didn't force Van's answer. He sniffed and shrugged. "Think on it. Be realistic." Tong turned and left without so much as a goodbye.
When the door closed behind Tong, Van shut his eyes. He had moved too much and he ached now. Spoken too much, breathed too much. Every moment of life like this was too much.

He was in a nightmare. That was the only explanation. None of this was real and if he just closed his eyes, then maybe when he opened them again he would be back in the real world where his body was whole and Wayman was alive. Van thought of Yumi, how he would hold her, kiss her, cherish her for all his life.

He would be better, Van promised. So please, God, just let him wake from this hell. Slowly, gradually, despite the pain or because of it, Van drifted off to sleep.

It was the only escape he had.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NSC 68

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by Auth. of: Abigail Whitmeyer
Chair, Committee on Reconstruction
Provisional Congress of the United States

A REPORT

TO THE

NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL

by

THE EXECUTIVE SECRETARY

on

UNITED STATES OBJECTIVES AND PROGRAMS FOR NATIONAL SECURITY

April 7, 2010

WASHINGTON

[redacted]

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A REPORT TO THE PRESIDENT
PURSUANT TO THE PREIDENT'S DIRECTIVE
OF MARCH 31 2010

April 7, 2010

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NSC LETTER 11/13/21 F84-947
By NARS, Date
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TERMS OF REFERENCE

The following report is submitted in response to the President's directive of March 17, 2010 which reads:

> "That the President direct the National Security Council to undertake a reexamination of our ability to withstand future ENDBRINGER activity should the TRIUMVIRATE fall in the line of duty."

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NSC Letter 11/8/21 E.O. 13526
NARA, Date
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I. PRESENT RISKS OF THE ENDBRINGER CRISIS

The present trajectory of the United States in the face of the ENDBRINGER threat will lead to economic, social, and political collapse within twenty (20) to thirty (30) years. Current and projected resources are not expected to produce a solution to the gravest threat that this Nation has ever faced. We first predict a continuation and then acceleration of the economic malaise that has been underway since the middle 1990s. Economic difficulties will likely exacerbate existing social tensions in the United States, which will together create a foundation conducive to political instability..

Note, these projections are contingent on the assumption that there will be no further ENDBRINGER attacks on the United States. A worst-case scenario, similar to the Kyushu or Newfoundland attacks by LEVIATHAN, could accelerate total system collapse by up to five (5) years.

The issues that face us are momentous, involving the fulfillment or destruction not only of this Republic but of civilization itself. They are issues which will not await our deliberations. With conscience and resolution this Government and the people it represents must now take new and fateful decisions, hopeless though they may be.

20 or 30 years? If only...

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NSC letter 11/3/21 F24-047

A. ECONOMIC ASPECTS

Global trade has fallen to a standstill. The 'Second Globalization' that was predicted during the 1980s never matured to fruition. The transformation of the communist People's Republic of China into the Chinese Union-Imperial, led by the Yàngbǎn (樣板) has permanently closed off mainland China and much of East Asia. China is home to some of the world's largest deposits of rare earth minerals. Securing alternative sources has become ever more difficult in the intervening years as ENDBRINGER attacks have proliferated.

The destruction of Kyushu by LEVIATHAN has removed Japan's status as a potential competitor to the United States, yet at the same time it destroyed one of the relative handful of countries capable of high-precision and technologically advanced manufacturing.

And also killed millions of innocent civilians

The recession that accompanied the end of the 'Dot-Com Boom' in the early years of the last decade was predicted to last, at a maximum, seven (7) quarters. Its duration has been forty-one (41) quarters with no end in sight. Unprecedented quantitative easing by the Federal Reserve has not proved able to solve the economic malaise. The stock market has recovered only ninety-five per cent (95%) following the destruction of Madison by the SIMURGH last year, whose previous high was only ninety-eight percent of the record level that preceded LEVIATHAN in Seattle, which had not yet fully recovered from BEHEMOTH in New York City in 1994.

QE didn't work any the FED can't be fixed by the markets.

The problem is structural. ENDBRINGER activity is and will continue to erode the basic foundations of the national and the world economy.

Unless something changes in the near future, we will be reduced to scattered pockets of terrified survivors ruled by militant warlords.

As opposed to the federalist cliques that would have emerged

B. POLITICAL ASPECTS

A collapse in the authority of the United States government in or around 2030 is plausible. The imbalance between villains and heros in favor of the former has been increasing since the early 1990s. It is not improbable that a juncture will be reached in the near future which will enable local and regional villain populations to act with total impunity for law-enforcement structures.

The delegitimization of federal authority has its probable catalyst in the inability of the Parahuman Response Team and/or the Protectorate to resolve a nascent S-class threat, see. Ellisburg or Gary, or to provide sufficient protection in the face of an ENDBRINGER attack on the continental United States.

Mounting stresses on infrastructure will likely make it difficult to ensure a steady and safe logistical network of food transportation and distribution between net production and net consumption areas. In the absence of higher authorities, local Parahuman Response Team offices will likely agglomerate as they attempt to withstand the superior power of bandits, organized crime, disorganized crime and more, all led by villain parahumans.

In the most extreme variant of this prediction, formal deterritorialization of governmental authority is not improbable. As cities and regions assume power devolved to them by federal and state inaction or inability, a permanent restructuring of the political order has the potential to arise. Given the increasing disparities in parahuman allegiance, we predict that most of the resulting socio-political units in this scenario will likely be governed, directly or implicitly, by villain parahumans. The disintegration of national authority across much of central Africa during the 1990s provides one possible model for this outcome.

Should deterritorialization prove likely, we recommend that the federal government prepare a base of operations from which to exert what direct authority that remains. Provisions should be stockpiled in abundance to last several years. If necessary, the civilian population of the region may have to be transferred, conscripted, or, in the worst-case scenario, liquidated to conserve resources for the loyal.

Horror begat by force. I'm sure that no one will notice or object to their neighbors disappearing.

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II. POSSIBLE COURSES OF ACTION

Three possible courses of action by the United States in the present contingency can be distinguished. They are: a. forcible conscription and mental conversion of Parahuman populations; b. attempted extraplanetary evacuation of select members of the American population; c. dimensional evacuation of large sections of the American population to EARTH ALEPH, or to an as-yet undiscovered dimension.

Always the euphemisms

A. PARAHUMAN CONSCRIPTION

Societal prejudices, stemming in large part from the SIMURGH, have ensured the Protectorate and the Parahuman Response Team downplay the number and strength of owned MASTER-class parahumans. One solution to the problem of ever-decreasing numbers of hero parahumans is to utilize current resources to acquire and reorient the mental frameworks of villain parahumans. Such a strategy would no doubt prove unpopular with the civilian population, but the potential rewards would be immense. With a relatively minimal expenditure of effort, the United States government could assemble sufficient numbers of parahumans to secure political stability for the forseeable future. The details of planning and executing such an operation are best left to loyal elements of the Protectorate and Parahuman Response Team, but undoubtedly the United States possesses capabilities sufficient to accomplish this task.

In light of predicted objections on the grounds of constitutional due process, we offer the reminder that it is the clandestine policy of the United States government that parahumans are not *Homo sapiens sapiens* and therefore do not possess constitutional rights in matters of national security.

The parahuman population will be given the option to fight for the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic, of their own free will or with a transplanted personality following a mind wipe. We do not grant them the option of fighting or death; they will all die. The question that remains is only how they choose to embrace this certainty.

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B. EXTRAPLANETARY EVACUATION

A second option would be to gather select members of the United States government for an extraplanetary evacuation. While the logistical challenges involved in such an endeavor are not small, we believe that they are surmountable. TINKER-class parahumans would be able to generate necessary components for the construction, operation, and maintenance for the spacecraft(s) in question. Given the difficulties of sustaining life in such a hostile environment, the most workable solution would be levels of cryostasis 'pods' with ship functions handled by a rotating crew of TINKER-class parahumans and professional astronaut-engineers.

The system for the selection of passengers would no doubt prove contentious. Only the smallest fraction of the federal government of the United States would be able to be evacuated even under the most generous circumstances. Deployment of loyal elements of the United States Armed Forces, the Protectorate, the Parahuman Response Team, and the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, are all likely contingent on key members and/or their families being offered the opportunity for survival.

Current technological advancement has not yet managed a system for artificial oxygenation replication on the scale provided, neither for the requisite fuel to power the spacecraft(s), and sustenance for the small crew will likely prove an issue. Unfortunately, there currently exists no known TINKER-class parahuman in Protectorate databases with the requisite specialization to offer assistance for this project.

Despite the aforementioned challenges, the solution proposed above represents what might be the only way to ensure the continuity and the survival of the American government. No ENDBRINGER has proved able to traverse outer space; the SIMURGH is dormant while lying in Lower Earth Orbit and will not pose an impediment to the project.

Only those with demonstrated loyalty to the federal government should be allowed to evacuate. Those who learn of the program's existence prior to lift-off should be recruited, if they possess valuable skills, or eliminated in order to ensure secrecy.

We need to search the archives for the memo that promulgated extrajudicial executions.

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C. Dimensional Evacuation

The third and last option proposed is an organized evacuation of large segments of the population of the United States into alternate dimensions. There is no reason to suspect that any ENDBRINGER is capable of trans-dimensional movement.

Earth ALEPH is currently the only known and accessible dimension save Earth BET. The trans-dimensional portal constructed by parahuman HAYWIRE does not now possess the capabilities for the mass movement of millions or tens of millions of individuals, but such logistical challenges should not prove difficult to surmount.

Two options exist for organizing the evacuation of the American populace into ALEPH. The first would be a peaceful transfer, negotiated with the Government of the ALEPH UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT. Unfortunately, because the population of ALEPH is higher than that of BET, it is unlikely that any large numbers of BET citizens would be granted asylum. A selection process of some unknown sort would have to be created and implemented, most likely in secret to prevent mass hysteria on the part of those who were not selected for evacuation.

The long-standing refusal on the part of ALEPH to permit any trans-dimensional movement of people could prove a barrier. Should this barrier prove insurmountable, there stands the option of a belligerent action taken to safeguard the continued safety and survival of the United States of America.

The best course of action under these circumstances would be a coordinated strike against major population centers and military command and control centers on ALEPH. A cornered animal is the most dangerous. Should the situation demand, we will secure the survival of our way of life amidst the dying screams of every nation on ALEPH. If the world burns because of their obstinacy then so be it. The heat will forge the United States of America anew.

Utter madness. The remnants of the FRJ and Protectorate against the resources of a combined world?

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CONCLUSIONS

The foregoing analysis indicates that the probable long-term outcomes of the death of the TRIUMVIRATE on the ability of the United States to withstand attendant consequences of ENDBRINGER activity.

Given the severity of the issues, we do not feel that it is in our place to recommend one option over the others. We merely wish to provide this Government with a range of possible courses of action should the situation arise that the United States of America no longer possesses the best defence against the gravest threat to ever face Humanity.

The people of this Country yearn for relief from the ever-looming threat of total collapse arising from ENDBRINGER activity. No relief will arrive. The TRIUMVIRATE are stopgaps. They cannot stop the end, but merely delay it. Terminus is coming.

I want to hate them. I really do.
The most powerful people on Bet, with all the information that allowed them to see how close the end really was.

Irony is, when the end came? The EBs were nowhere to be seen

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Alright, so we have NO idea what to expect going in here. New Endbringer, tons of rumors, and the authorities aren't saying anything except "don't". So we packed everything...
BUCHAREST_2012_Intro
BUCURESTI
And we're not even that far in!
Think I found another statue... he hasn't moved for like 10 minutes
Dude!
2012_09_20_4.m4z
Oh, this is cool- looks like some cape punched through this window here to escape!
And I guess they came in through here...? Mayb-
OH FUCK!
If you get your arm chomped off I'm leaving you here.
Okay, but have you checked this thing out?
Goodbye, Bucharest, we will miss you...
But hopefully you'll miss us on our way out.
Heh.

THE ONE-CAPE TOWN THAT NEVER STOPS BURNING

By ROWAN PALMER

When I was assigned to investigate the goings-on of August Hollow, I thought I'd been handed a paid vacation. Three days and three nights in some tiny farm town, far away from my office building, put up in a bed and breakfast on the Gazette's dime. I figured I'd chat up the locals a bit, get a pull quote or two and call it good, because there was no way I'd find anything worth the front page.

The 'leads' were less than flimsy: individuals had taken photos of clouds lit up ember-orange from below, at different angles and, purportedly, on different nights. The photos circulated on an online forum as evidence of supposed cape activity. A user claimed they'd seen a figure wreathed in flames roving the country roads and the rumors took off from there. Within the week they'd collectively dubbed the cape Effigy and decided August Hollow must be its favored stomping grounds.

Very little held up to a critical probe. The pictures failed to capture so much as a wisp of rising smoke. The would-be witness offered no evidence beyond their own say-so. Not a single verified resident of the town had posted in the thread. It was pretty clear to me that there was less going on than met the eye; perhaps some jumpy suburbanites had caught glimpses of a firework and cried cape, and urban legends had helped jam together puzzle pieces that didn't actually fit.

I explained as much to my wife, but she was less assured. "A bucket, a fire blanket, and a portable extinguisher," she ordered, pretending to fight our dog for his treat. He tugged it from her grip and bounded away, tail wagging in triumph. She looked me in the eyes. "At minimum."

Far be it from me to deny her.

Once I'd gotten everything packed and let her check it over, I kissed her goodbye and hit the road. For all the miles between my city and the town, the drive was a straight shot down the freeway. I took the opportunity to spin an audiobook CD.

Like most rural towns down that stretch, August Hollow was organized like a gradient between the road and the farmland beyond. Coming off the exit ramp, I was greeted with a two-pump gas station and a convenience store that kept its map racks near the front. Navigating the two blocks of proper shops and businesses I found myself among exposed, faded brick and inexpensive wood siding. Stumpy little trees just starting to go yellow decorated the sidewalks and many of the folks I saw about their business wore scarves and jackets. My destination was on the border between the commercial streets and the residentials, just before all the houses and public service offices.

The bed and breakfast was bigger than most of the other buildings, if only for being two stories tall. It was a dull off-white with grey shingles and large windows, about as wide as it was tall. A pair of rose bushes framed the front steps, thinnest near the foot traffic. I hesitated in the entryway when I saw scorch marks all over the wooden floor, but shook it off. It was clearly a design choice; the scorching was too consistent to be anything but.

The proprietor, one Floyd Greene, was a stout, older fellow with weathered hands and kind eyes. If he thought my accoutrements strange, he didn't react except to raise a fuzzy brow. He led me up the stairs to my room, showed me where I could stow my things, and pointed out the view from the window on the far wall. It turned out that, when the rest of the town is mostly one-story buildings and flat farmland, being two stories up gives you a pretty nice view of the fields.

That first night, tucked beneath a heavy quilt and nuzzled into a downy pillow, I slept easy.

When I ambled into the dining room the next morning, Mr. Greene had made eggs, bacon and toast. He told me he'd been a farmer when he was younger and I told him I wrote for the paper. Between bites I inquired about where I could find this, that, and the other, and he gave me simple, clear directions to each. When I thanked him and made to leave, he stopped me and asked what exactly I was here for. I leveled with him and said it was for a story, but not one I expected to find.

He seemed satisfied with that, though there was something else in the look he gave me. "Careful you don't upset nobody," he warned. "I know the city's got its own kind of crazy, but folks around here aren't used to that sort of thing. Mind the questions you ask, yeah?"

I assured him I didn't plan on stirring up trouble, and I meant it.

My first destination was the local school. Not an uncommon way to start an investigation; schools tend to be central loci in community gossip networks. Teachers chatter with other teachers, parents gab with other parents, and kids take everything they overhear and pass it around. Most of that is overblown, speculative, or just outright false, but if you can pick the wheat from the chaff, you can pick up on a detail or two that'll help you put a story together.

The school itself was a ramshackle thing on the border between the streets and the field, a collection of portables wedged together to imitate a proper building. Kindergarteners were taught one door down from grade schoolers, and middle schoolers likewise shared their side with high schoolers.

I found one of the teachers alone during the lunch period, nibbling a tuna sandwich and supervising kids as they played in the grass. I ran through some easy questions with her, the kind you ask when you don't know what exactly you're fishing for, vague and open-ended. Have you seen anything you couldn't explain, did any parents mention interesting happenings, were any of your students withdrawn under odd circumstances.

She got an uncertain squint in her eye at that last one but just shook her head. "Nothing out of the ordinary. You don't always end the school year with every kid you had at the start, of course. People move, or they switch to homeschooling, or... or something else happens, and your class is a little smaller after that. But nothing strange, no."

I thanked her for her time and wandered afield, coming across a gaggle of third or fourth graders under a tree. They sat on a bed of fallen leaves, mindless of clothing stains or hidden insects. I watched one drop his granola bar on the ground, then pick it up again and take another bite.

When I introduced myself they had none of the wariness I'd come to expect from children in metropolitan areas, and when I started asking similar questions they were more than eager to share.

"He came to my mama's farm and took an apple from our tree," said the one with the granola bar, grinning wide.

"Nuh-uh!" retorted another, hands on her hips. "If he did, your house woulda been blowed up!"

A third mumbled as he picked a dry leaf apart, bit by bit. "You can hear him at night sometimes. But only if you listen real close."

I wrote down their statements and took my leave, going over everything I'd gotten. The teacher hadn't given me much but I could easily quote the kids to help sell the urban legend angle. Their accounts were a little thematically incongruous, as rural cryptids went, but in the era of real live superheroes it wasn't unusual for imaginations to get out of hand.

On the second night, just as I was heading to bed, a low flicker in the dark caught my eye. I crept over to the window, squinting into the far fields.

Out amidst the farmland, distant enough I could barely see it, a small fire danced. It was low and dim, as fires go, but in the quiet void of rural night it was almost entrancing.

I watched it a while to determine if it was dangerous but it didn't seem to spread or grow any. Some small part of me, the same part that had compelled ten-year-old me to hide beneath my blankets whenever the house creaked, worried it might be Effigy itself, wandering the fields in search of someone to burn. I wasn't ten anymore, though, and I didn't let creaky walls or country bonfires spook me. I grabbed my portable CD player, got into bed facing the wall, and fell asleep to a dulcet baritone reading me into dreams.

My second destination was a funeral home.

I couldn't remember the last time I'd been to one. Violent crime wasn't my job's focus, and on the occasion I did need to ask about a body I'd talked to one of the city's morticians. They tended to be clinical and blunt, which suited me fine.

The funeral home was small, not much more than a display room for the caskets and a little office across from it. The office's walls were a warm yellow-white and a soft red rug covered the hard floor. Pictures of flowers in vases hung around the room, livened by gentle light coming through gauzy curtains. A corded phone sat on one side of the varnished wooden desk, mirrored on the other side by a box of tissues. It felt as though the room was trying to comfort and console me at every turn, save for the short bureau against the wall, which displayed a few different designs of urn.

The funeral director was very cordial, skirting around the question of why I, a stranger to August Hollow, was visiting the home. When she asked what she could do for me, she did her best not to sound too probing.

I, in turn, did my best not to show my unease with the atmosphere. I told her I was drafting a report comparing fire danger in the city to the country and asked if the town had seen any fire-related deaths in recent years.

Her reaction was hard to decipher but no less polite. The condition for her cooperation was that I would leave real names out of my report and use pseudonyms where necessary, which I agreed to. She took her time sifting through the file cabinet beside her desk until, finally, she pulled out some papers.

"Oh yes," she said, holding her reading glasses up to her face. "Earlier this year, in fact. A couple in their early forties, lost to a house fire." She shook her head, putting the file back where she'd found it. "They'd only just moved to town, too. Were busy putting it all together right up 'til the end.

Would have been settled in by then, only they'd insisted on doing it all themselves. Never quite understood that this community takes care of its own."

She indulged my followup questions about the incident. To hear her talk about it, the blaze had been eminently preventable if they'd taken the proper precautions, but the couple had been stubborn and decided not to take the advice of the townsfolk. She then reassured me, as though I had a personal stake in the matter, that it wasn't the worst way to go.

"That's the thing about a burning building, you know. It's not the fire that gets you in the end. It's the smoke. Suffocation. The fire just… cleans you up."

I thanked her for her time and reaffirmed my promise not to use any real names. My gaze lingered on the cremation urns until, finally, I took my leave.

When I got back to the bed and breakfast later that evening, Mr. Greene was sweeping the entryway. He paused long enough to give me a curt nod.

Making a concerted effort not to look at whatever he was sweeping up, I nodded back and climbed the stairs. I reminded myself I was only in town until the morning, and by the same time tomorrow I'd be back in my apartment, cuddling with my wife and our dog on the couch, far away from tight-knit country towns and urban legends.

On the third night, I woke up in hell.

A wicked light danced through the window, casting the room in vivid orange-red and stark shadows. I tore my headphones away and flew from the bed to the wall, half crouched beneath the sill, heart racing. I made to peek outside only to be near-blinded by the glare coming from the fields.

Where the small fire had been the night before, there was now an utter inferno, blazing skyward like a great and terrible tower, licking the sky well above my building's two stories. It seemed to rage against the night itself, staving off the dark with its awful splendor, relentless and wild.

I watched it roil, transfixed, my fingers shaking against the sill. The eerie near-silence made the hairs on the back of my neck stand up, but if I listened close I could almost hear something. A keening, an animal wail, all but lost to the wind.

Without warning the fire flared, turning my vision white and startling me away from the window. I scrabbled backwards as best I could but my breath came short and shallow. My arms gave out as it all became too much to handle, and at some point, writhing and panting on the floor, I passed right out.

When I woke up, I was still on the floor.

I scrambled towards my things, grabbed the portable extinguisher and waved its nozzle around as a mobster might brandish a tommy gun.

But there was nothing to put out. There were no ravenous fires, no smoldering embers, no once-friendly townsfolk in masonic garb closing in with torches. Just a lovely view of tranquil farmland and the gentle light of dawn creeping in.

Bleary and ill-rested, I crept downstairs, nozzle at the ready, fire blanket over my shoulder, only to find Mr. Greene in the kitchen making eggs, bacon and toast. He simply sighed, shook his head and turned back to the stove.

Some half-conscious part of me thought he'd made quite a bit more than the two of us alone could eat, but I didn't feel up to small talk. Instead I bit the bullet and asked directly about Effigy.

Mr. Greene told me to take a seat and wait. He set two plates down on the table across from each

other, one with a reasonable helping of food and the other stacked higher than a funeral pyre, then settled into a chair.

I wasn't sure if I was about to be prematurely cremated by a feral cape or put to the stake by a Pastor-style cape cult, but at that point I was too sleep-deprived to run. So instead, I sat across from him, and I waited.

My breakfast had all but gone cold when the front door swung open with a bang.

He was on the skinny side of slim, hunched forward like a hound on the prowl, wearing a pair of thick black overalls and nothing more. Dirt caked his bare feet. Thick bags under his eyes stained his sockets dark. His teeth were bared, his pitch-black hair had grown shaggy and wild, and flames lit and gave out along his exposed skin like matches being struck and snuffed.

He stomped over to Mr. Greene and snatched a handful of bacon from his too-full plate, staring him down, silently daring him to put up a fight. He nabbed a piece of toast with his free hand and shoved it right into his mouth. The last bites burned black in his hand before he got to them, but he forced them down anyways.

Then he turned and his gaze caught on me, finally registering my presence.

I gripped the fire blanket to my chest on instinct, trying not to make any sudden moves.

The boy leered down at me, frowning, and made to take it from me. When I resisted he snarled and his flames flared, a brief burst of light and heat. The room filled with the acrid smell of burnt meat and the wooden floor received a new scorch mark. It was fearsome, or it would have been had I not become distracted by the agitation in his bloodshot in his eyes.

In that moment, it struck me that this guy was a *kid*, lanky and awkward, sixteen at the oldest. His skin was splotched with acne and his chin had sprouted a meager crop of stubble. If I'd been standing, he'd have been a couple inches shorter than me.

His fires burned hot and fierce, but they didn't produce a single wisp of smoke.

Taking advantage of my distraction, he tugged the blanket away from me. When it didn't burn in his grip, he grinned, equal parts surprised and self-satisfied, and wandered out the way he'd come, shoveling extra-crispy bacon into his maw.

After a long, still moment, Mr. Greene cleared his throat and offered to explain.

Still reeling, I pulled out a tape recorder.

"There's this thing about fire," he began, "that anyone who works the earth ought to know. Before civilization, before agriculture, before human beings, fire was already part of the land's natural cycle. Happened by chance, usually; hot weather in a dry climate, lightning hitting a tree, that sort of thing. But when it did happen, it often did more good for the vegetation than bad. Big logs, pine needles, all that stuff that takes forever to decompose? Fire gets at it and whoosh, those nutrients go right back into the soil. Insect infestations, plant diseases?" He snapped his fingers. "Gone. And just like that, life gets a chance to grow free again.

"Now, when the burning gets out of control, that's when the bad starts to pile up. You get that most these days, people coming in, getting up to some foolery, starting the blaze that takes down a hundred acres. Sometimes, the land can't recover so quick. Sometimes, the fire comes back to bite us." He looked me dead in the eyes. "Sometimes it burns down a house with a couple and their kid still inside."

He leaned back in his chair, staring down at the trail of dirt footprints. “He hasn’t stopped burning since then. It’s smaller when he’s calm, but when he gets worked up it just grows and grows. Has to eat and drink quick before it chars or boils. Sleeps where his home used to be, since it’s too burnt out to catch when he dreams. Wouldn’t be able to wear nothing if it weren’t for those overalls, being fireman’s wear. He doesn’t take charity, so we all find our ways to make it look like it isn’t.”

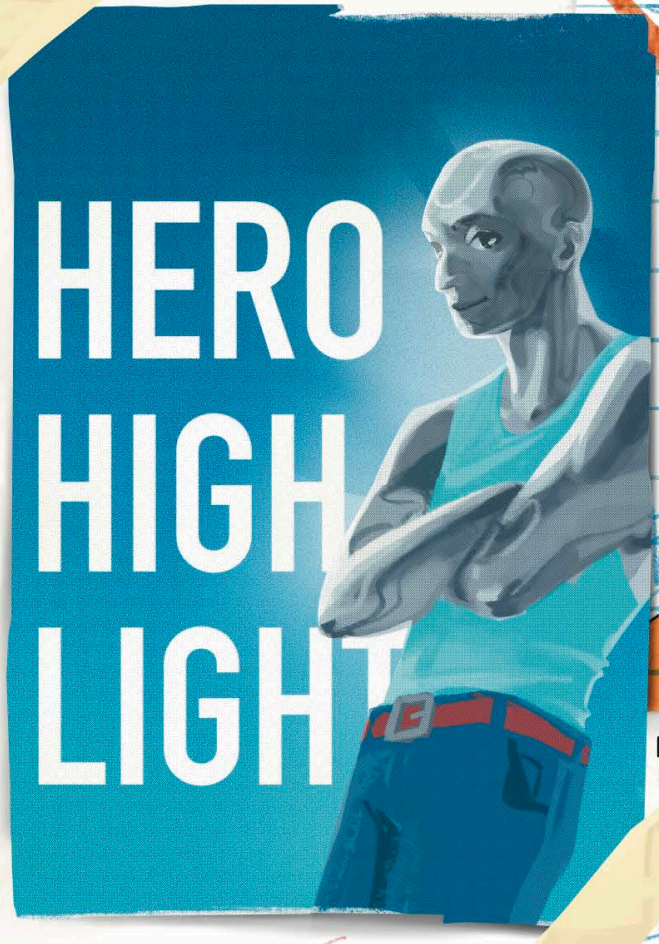
His hands came together as if to pray, only they were tilted towards me. “The trick to working with fire is this: You give it what it needs, you keep it from going wild, and you let it do its thing. Then one day, when everything’s had time to settle down?” He spread his hands. “The cycle can start again.”

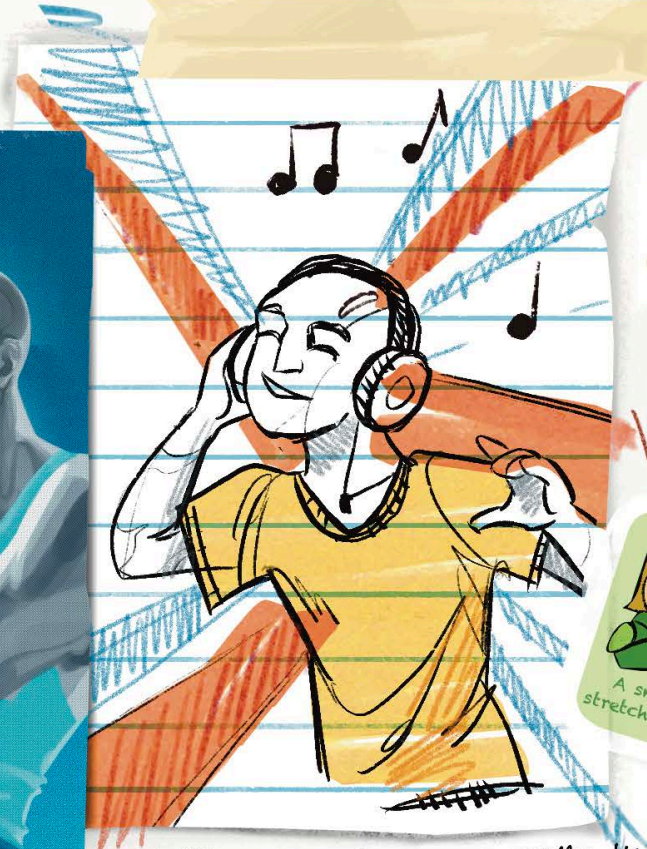
He finished what was left of his plate soon after, leaving me alone at the table. I lost track of time sitting there, slowly digesting, my own plate untouched.

Later that day, as I was driving up the same freeway I’d come down on, I caught the sunset in my rearview mirror. It started out vivid, flushed with the sun’s last conniptions, but as I put the fields further and further behind me, the sky’s temper turned cool, and brazen red faded into a calm purple-blue.

When I finally got home, my wife met me with our dog in her arms and I met them both with a long embrace. She tried to apologize for worrying too much but I stopped her and told her the protective gear had been a big help. She spent the rest of the evening in a good mood, and when I grabbed a stepladder to triple-check all our smoke detectors, she didn’t ask any questions.

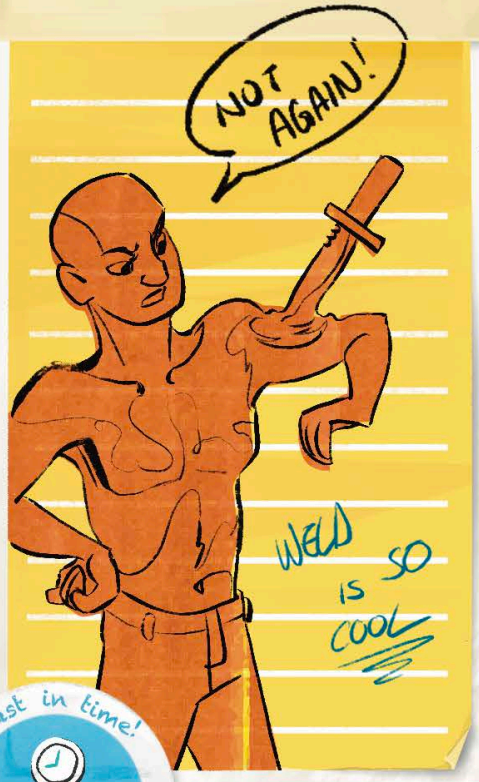
WELD FEATURED IN ↓↓↓ CAPE ILLUSTRATED!!!





I SAW HIM A LITTLE ON THE TV YESTERDAY. HE WAS FIGHTING ONE OF THE TEETH CAPES HEMMORGIA OR HOWEVER YOU SPELL HER NAME

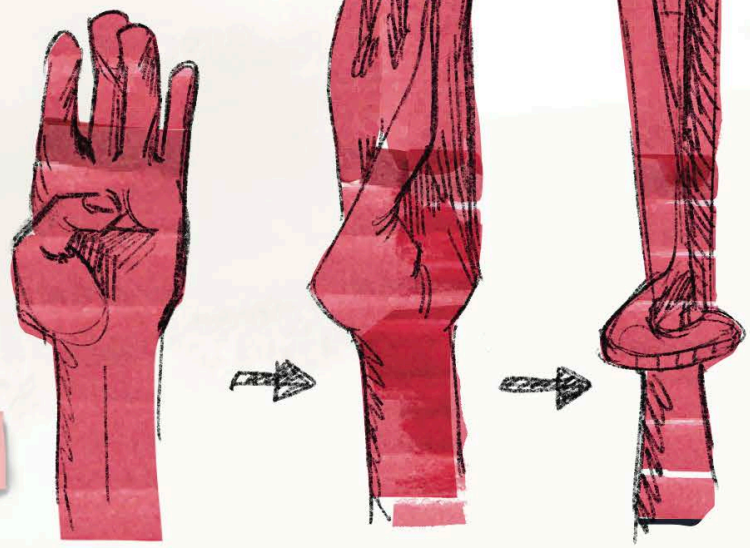
THE BLOOD CONTROLLER. AND JUST... IT GETS ME, EVERY TIME. WATCHING HIM ENDURE ANYTHING. HE WOKE UP UNDER A STRANGE SKY WITH NOTHING TO HIS NAME— HE DIDN'T EVEN HAVE THAT. AND YET HE DECIDES THAT HE WAS GOING TO SAVE LIVES, DESPITE NOT OWING THE WORLD A THING.



THERE WAS A MOMENT TODAY, AFTER CLASS I SAW THIS KID GET SHOVED INTO THE BUSHES BY SOME SENIORS. AND I KNEW THAT WASN'T OKAY, BUT... I WAS AFRAID. AND THEN I FLASHED BACK TO THAT PICTURE OF WELD, PUSHING THROUGH THE BLOOD. AND I JUST HAD THIS MOMENT OF... NOT PEACE, BUT SOMETHING ELSE. I WALKED UP AND TOLD THEM TO LEAVE HIM ALONE

I GOT PUNCHED BUT IT WAS WORTH IT. I DID SOMETHING.

I HOPE HE'D BE PROUD OF ME.



APPARENTLY THE NEXT SERIES OF BB WARD STICKERS HAVE WELD IN THEM

Out Of The Depths

May 2013 - Charlie Holland

The last time I came to Brockton Bay, it was a very different city. I had gone to speak to Mayor Padillo, shortly after her election in August 2011, about her bold vision to transform her home from the ruin she had inherited, into the logistical hub for an entirely new world. Although the worst days in the city's history were already behind them then, the scars those days had left were apparent. Streets were still underwater, sections of downtown were still sealed off, and the people still carried themselves with the wariness that follows a collapse of the social order.

It's the people that have bounced back the furthest since then. The weapons that could be seen stuck in belts, or in the hands of half the passersby on that last trip, are now absent. The plywood boards and metal grates that covered the storefront windows are gone. Most significantly of all, the sense of dread that was so palpable before in Brockton Bay, that seems so pervasive in America today, isn't quite as present. Instead, on the faces of the construction workers, and the bartenders, and even on the face of Miss Militia, the leader of the much embattled ENE Protectorate, hope can be seen.

This recovery is perhaps embodied best in Sierra Kiley, the 23 year old chief executive of the newly formed Rock Bay Reconstruction Group. We met in a conference room on the 30th floor of RBR's recently finished headquarters. The room lacked any decoration, but the view from the window more than made up for the absence of any unintrusive artwork, or potted plants. It's long been said that the future of a city can be judged by the number of cranes visible from its centre, and judging by that, Brockton Bay is doing very well indeed. Of course, that isn't the only remarkable thing about the city's skyline. One building in particular stands out aside from all the rest, a tower that juts out from the street. Even from this distance it's a hive of activity. Inside is one of the key components of Brockton Bay's success, the inter-dimensional portal.

When Ms Kiley arrived, it was without fanfare. She walked into the conference room, and stopped in front of me, hand held out, with an abruptness that suggested that this was perhaps the first time she'd stood still all day. Her handshake was perfect enough to be evidently practiced, and she was dressed in executive chic, in sharp contrast to her buzzed red hair. We exchanged pleasantries, and then sat down to talk about her career, the business she runs, and about Brockton Bay.

Thank you for taking the time to sit down with me today Ms Kiley. I wanted to start this off by asking how someone in her 20's, with no prior business experience, ends up as one of the founding members of the largest construction company in America's fastest developing city?

The short answer is that I was elected to the position, by the business owners, investors, union representatives and other stakeholders, who believed that I was the best person to run Rock Bay Reconstruction.

And the long answer?

In the weeks after Leviathan, I worked a wide variety of jobs. I distributed food, I cleared rubble and garbage, I worked in the shelters, and eventually, I found myself helping to organise the other people doing that work. There were all kinds of people out there in the beginning, business owners and dockworkers, bankers and single parents. When things had begun to stabilise, we knew that we wanted to keep the momentum going, and continue with what we'd been doing, helping to rebuild Brockton Bay, and we knew that we would need to be organised to do it. Then when the conversation moved onto who would lead this company, my experience working in a wide variety of roles, and with a wide variety of people, led to my name being put forward.

So it wasn't a role that you went looking for? You were nominated for it?

I think if I'd been looking for it, no one would have taken me seriously. If I hadn't been working with the people who had been in construction, or with the dockworkers association, or with any of the other groups that eventually came together to form Rock Bay, then they wouldn't have ever considered me for the role, and the fact that I wasn't seeking power probably had a lot to do with why they trusted me with it.

Don't you find it strange, that you were the person they decided was most qualified? Aren't you nervous about having a position like this with so little experience?

It certainly wasn't a position I ever expected to hold, but I trust in the people that nominated me, and my day to day isn't that different from what I was doing in those early days. It's about making sure that everyone's on the same page, and it's about understanding the needs of the city, and it's about bringing everyone forwards, into a future that's more resilient to the challenges that are waiting for us.

You make it sound like you're running for Mayor.

I think if I didn't have a drive to make things better, I wouldn't be where I am today. And if you don't believe in the work that you're doing, then it's very difficult to persuade people to invest in it.

Has there been any difficulty securing outside investment? It wasn't long ago that there was debate in Washington about whether they would condemn the entire city.

All of that was before the company's official founding, and more importantly, before the portal. People were much more willing to put their faith in Brockton Bay once they understood the ramifications of what access to another world meant.

Do you have any doubts about the portal? I'm sure you're aware of how unreliable parahuman created materials can be, and there are plenty of cautionary tales about companies founded on a premise that relies on science that they don't understand.

While I can't pretend to understand the physics behind how the portal works, the reports from the Protectorate indicate that they believe it to be stable, and permanent, which matches the assessment of the independent experts that we've hired. While there are many things we still don't know about how parahuman phenomena interact with the world, we do know that they operate on processes that we can predict, and understand. The impermanence that you mention does apply to many physical products, but there is precedent for other more immaterial effects having substantial durations.

Okay then, let's talk about the settlement on the other side of the portal. What's Rock Bay's involvement there?

Initially, everything on the other side was designed to accommodate the exploration of Earth Gimel. It was once that beachhead had been established, and the city was given the green light to continue development, that we were contracted to develop the area further, with more housing, better amenities, and transportation infrastructure designed to facilitate the movement of people and material both ways.

There must have been a lot of competition for the contracts to spearhead the 'New Brockton' site, how did a company that had only officially existed for a few short months manage to win out over more established competitors?

While Rock Bay itself is still new, many of the subsidiaries that joined together to make it have been operating in the city for a long time, and work had been happening since before the official incorporation date. We also own a large amount of real estate in the immediate vicinity of the portal. On top of that, Mayor Padillo's decision to award the contracts to local businesses gave us an edge over corporate interests from outside the city.

How closely have you been working with Mayor Padillo?

Our positions have required that we work together from an early stage. One of the first meetings I had in this role was with the Mayor, regarding the land around the portal.

And how has this been?

We found we shared an outlook, and I have a lot of respect for some of the work that she's done during her tenure so far, especially given that she spent the beginning of it still recovering from the attack on the debate.

That's the first time that you've touched on Brockton Bay's criminal element. Has Rock Bay encountered any difficulty with the Undersiders, or any of the other villains operating in the city?

Initially we encountered many of the same problems that every company still operating was facing, with attacks on deliveries, or warehouses being robbed, but the city is in a much more stable place than it was two years ago, and the only real disruption to our operations tends to come from the occasional cape fight closing roads, rather than any direct attacks on us.

Why do you think that is? There doesn't seem to be any other contender for who rules Brockton Bay's underworld, surely they have an interest in one of the most impactful businesses in "their" city?

I don't pretend to understand the motivations of criminals like that.

Alright then. You went from being a student, to running a business that employs nearly 2,000 people, in a very short period of time. How has the new role affected you personally?

I think the effect it had can't be separated from the context. Everything I had planned for the future fell apart after Leviathan, and the city that I had lived my whole life in was unrecognisable. It felt like everyone in the city was making a choice between trying to hold it all together, or letting it fall apart. I don't see much of myself in the student from before, but everything I'm doing now, just feels like an extension of that impulse, trying not to just to stop things from getting worse, but trying to build a better Brockton Bay than the one we had before.

Better in what way?

In the aftermath of tragedy, especially on the scale that we experienced in 2011, it can be easy to lose perspective on what the situation was before. So many of the problems that we had to deal with in the aftermath were the problems we had then, but magnified. We can't forget that they were just as real beforehand. The neo-nazi gangs, the rate of unemployment, the epidemic of drug use. None of these issues have gone away, but we've built from those depths, worked to tackle those problems, not just here at Rock Bay, but

everyone working in the Mayor's office, in the Protectorate, and countless others living in the city.

You're not the only person that views Brockton Bay in such a positive light. As one of the city's leading figures, what do you have to say to the people all across America that are looking to your home as a source of inspiration, and of hope?

I think that there are reasons to be hopeful as long as there are people fighting to keep people together, and working towards a better future.

When I last left Brockton Bay, I wasn't optimistic. The taxi out to the airport took me through some of the city's worst hit districts, and I couldn't quite wrap my head around the idea that things could get better there. That those streets, still cracked and flooded, those buildings, still burnt and emptied, would ever recover. Mayor Padillo was clearly a capable politician with an aspirational plan for the city, but my gut told me that the situation was already too far gone. I'd spent time in Gary, Indiana, and I'd followed the coverage of the situation in Jasper, both cities that had suffered setback after setback, and been unable to recover from their various crises, and root out the villains that had infested them. My gut told me that Brockton Bay was heading in that direction, even with the opportunities that the new world afforded, and the defection of a high profile villain.

I expected my interview to get lost in the seemingly unending stream of bad news that poured from the city, and for that conversation about condemning the city to crop up again, and again, until finally, something would give. Maybe another Endbringer attack. Maybe another assassination. Maybe just a continuation of the gang warfare that had plagued the city for months. I kept my alert on Brockton Bay, eager to hear more news about the portal, but some part of me was waiting for the final blow that would finish off the city. It never came. There was bad news, certainly. New villains arrived, and the old ones remained in place. Allegations of corruption and complicity, aimed at everyone from the Protectorate to the Mayor's office. But Brockton Bay as a city seems to have shrugged off these new challenges, even as the rest of the country struggles under the weight of these past years. People like Mayor Padillo, like Miss Militia, like Sierra Kiley, they've all kept working, as she said, towards a better future.

Today, leaving Brockton Bay again, I find myself agreeing with Ms Kiley, and feeling hopeful. Not just for the future of the city, but for America as a whole. Because it isn't just Brockton Bay that's benefiting. The good work that's being done there, its effects are rippling outwards. The portal isn't just revitalising industry in Brockton Bay, it's had positive impacts in Boston as well, and in the rest of the region. Monsters like Heartbreaker go into the city, and they don't come out again. And the knowledge that Brockton Bay, a city that nearly slipped beneath the waves, that it has managed to thrive despite everything, gives me the hope. The hope that I think we all need, to keep working for a better tomorrow.

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keep_an_eye posted "Something Strange" to Personal News:

I don't want to cry wolf. I know my track record is against me, so I'm just going to give it to you straight: I like birdwatching. And I see a lot more than birds while peering down my binoculars. Sometimes I see strange things. Things that look out of place.

It's not a Bigfoot type figure this time, or an unidentified craft, just something that gets stranger and stranger the more I think about it.

There was a carpark. Right next to a supermarket. Reasonably big place by local standards, has maybe a dozen employees throughout the week, and in the carpark there was a group loading some crates and boxes into a van.

Yeah, I know that doesn't sound like much, didn't look like much either.

Then I noticed one of the women carrying stuff around was dressed… not formal-formal, but office formal? Heels, neat clothes. So I thought to myself "okay, why's she dressed like that, she's going to hurt herself or dirty her clothes" and took a closer look.

She wasn't the only one not dressed properly for that kind of work, so I kept watching. Other stuff jumped out, like the loading bay at the side. Why weren't they using that instead of carrying things out to the carpark? Why were they loading that van, instead of one of the usual trucks?

Like I said, I see strange things sometimes, and this one puzzles me. I'll update if I figure anything out.

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keep_an_eye posted "Something Stranger" to Personal News:

So, about that report on the strange loading in a carpark? I figured something out.

Ever since I posted that, some detail was bugging me, like I was missing or forgetting something. Then the next day, I saw one of the group across the street. I was so caught up in the parts I couldn't figure that I didn't twig that I actually knew one of them.

Not terribly well, we're not friends or anything, but I knew her name and story and stuff, and a lead's a lead, right?

Yeah, that's where this gets stranger.

You see, when I went to ask her what was up? She didn't have a clue what I meant. Didn't know any van, denied being anywhere near that place, she just kept shaking her head and looking at me like I was being weird.

Okay, I'm not going to give away too much, but she always has this really distinctive hair ornament. Never seen someone with anything like it. So once I recognised her, I knew it was her for certain.

Since she doesn't want to talk about it for some reason, I guess I'll have to keep watching.

> \recovered_posts\report2.txt

keep_an_eye posted "Breakthrough" to Personal News:

Breaking news on the case of the thing in the carpark!

The good news is: I had a breakthrough. Those boxes and crates? Booze. After figuring that out, I got thinking about where it was going and asked around.

Pop quiz: who would buy crates of booze from a shady van without asking questions?

If you guessed "students", go to the top of the class! A friend living by the university did some snooping for me and some parties lately have been buying up booze on the cheap from, you guessed it, a familiar sounding van. No ages checked.

That's shady enough, which brings me to the bad news: the girl I recognised before? She runs the local AA meetings. The Earth would stop spinning before she got involved in something like this.

Something stinks and I need another nose. I got in touch with a friend, who'll be joining me on the case — with photography equipment.

I'll update you soon on what we uncover.

> \recovered_posts\report3.txt

keep_an_eye posted "Small Update" to Personal News:

It's been a while since I gave an update on the carpark case and frankly there's not much to report. My collaborator and I have been working on it, but haven't made any breakthroughs yet.

We staked out and caught a few more operations like the one I saw before, this time with cameras ready, so we've got photos and even a bit of footage now. Clear stuff, even, not like the stuff I snapped in the past.

I think we're hitting the limit on what we can figure out from watching from afar like this though. With the photos we took, we could put names to a few more faces, so we're following up on those now.

It's a bit confusing, to be honest. We did some digging on a few names so far and some of these people shouldn't be anywhere near this stuff. I mean, a few of them are at the top of the list of people I'd expect to protest this, because of their morals, or their business, or… it just makes no sense.

Only thing for it is to ask them directly and hope we get a better response than the last time I tried. I'll report on how we got on soon, hopefully I'll have managed to scan some of these photos properly by then too.

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keep_an_eye posted "Bigger Picture" to Personal News:

Okay, lots of ground covered on the carpark case. To start with, I need to come up with a better name, because this is about way more than just that one carpark.

After asking around a bit, we were able to stake out a few other locations with similar operations. Van rolls up, a group of people with no business being there gets out and starts loading stuff in. Booze, magazines, sweets, stuff that's portable and easy to shift. While we do photos and footage, I haven't had the time to scan it all yet.

We weren't just waiting around for stuff to happen, after all! We were trawling the archives and sifting through mountains of records, looking for anything similar. My partner figured that if so many people were working together so smoothly, this must have been running for a while, which meant someone else might have looked into it before.

It was a good thought, but we found nothing. No news articles, letters, reports, nothing about past incidents like this, or anything relevant about anyone we knew was involved.

Which brings us to the direct approach.

Frankly, my first attempt was probably the best so far, as useless as it was. I was more careful with this lot, since I didn't know the people involved, but didn't uncover anything new. Most of them just looked confused and denied knowing anything like what I described. The rest got very angry, very fast.

To be clear, I didn't try to accuse anyone of anything; I was as vague and unchallenging as I could be, but a few people just blew up at me until I stopped asking.

Something… something's up there, to have people so on edge. Will be more careful from now on, because this is looking very, very shady.

> \recovered_posts\report5.txt

keep_an_eye posted "Trouble" to Personal News:

I'm so glad I haven't attached my real name to these posts. Not that I think they've seen these, but it's one less thing to worry about.

So, about the shady things I was looking into: I am not a detective. Neither of us are. I like looking at birds and poking at strange things, so once it looked pretty likely that we were investigating something honest to God illegal, and we had some clear photos to support that conclusion, we went to the authorities.

Not directly. Sent a detailed write-up to a friend of a friend in law enforcement, asking his opinion, and got nothing back. We knew he got it, and at first we thought that maybe he was doing some investigating himself before letting us know what he thought. Then days turned into weeks, and nothing happened, so I went to him in person.

He didn't want to hear it. Waved me off, rolling his eyes, you know the deal. He kept telling me it was preposterous and impossible. So I showed him the photos. Copies of the photos, I mean, we kept the negatives and did up a few batches. Good thing too.

He took them from me, flicked through the first couple, and had this strange look in his face, like he was disgusted by what he saw. For a moment I thought I'd got through to him. I had said all I could, so I left then.

My partner was watching from outside the whole time, through the window, and they just handed me the binoculars before I could speak, pointing back into the room.

He was hurling them into the fire, one, two, a handful at a time. Then when there was a mound of them, shrivelling up on the coals, he just stood there, warming his hands, watching them burn.

I wish that was the end of this post, but I went back to the first person I recognised, to see if maybe she wanted to say something now, and she hefted a brick at my head the moment I opened my mouth. Didn't say a word, just started swinging and throwing things at me, looking at me like… like the detective looked at the photographs.

We are out of our depth. There's something seriously wrong going on here and if we don't try to fix this, I don't think anyone else will.

Take care, please.

> \recovered_posts\report6.txt

keep_an_eye posted "Going Underground" to Personal News:

I know my reputation is against me, but if you're reading this, you can't brush this off like another bigfoot or flying saucer sighting. This is serious. Possibly even dangerous.

My partner and I have been doing a lot of talking and thinking about what we know, and what we should do. Our current theory is that there is some kind of coercion at play. Blackmail, threats, some kind of manipulation.

It's the only thing that makes sense. Why would a detective burn evidence? Why would an AA leader help sell booze under the table? What would turn her violent over the barest mention of the subject?

These people are scared. Maybe some are outright corrupt, but if they were all truly complicit, then they would have followed up after I made them suspicious instead of just letting me go. They're scared and being forced to rebuff anyone snooping around. Maybe they're trying to protect me, in their own way, trying to stop me getting involved.

I'm less sure about that last point now. We made a few other attempts to talk to people and had to run for safety each time. We're abandoning that line of investigation, it's just too dangerous.

We have a new plan now.

My partner has hung back so far, watching from a distance while I asked questions. I can't risk being seen, but their face should still be unknown, so while I'm going underground… they're going to get involved, and find out who's pulling the strings.

Updates will be infrequent from now on.

> \recovered_posts\report7.txt

keep_an_eye posted "Update" to Personal News:

It's been a while, but the investigation is still ongoing. I hope.

I'm still in hiding, my friend is still undercover, and maybe I'm just paranoid, but something feels wrong. We agreed to meet up every now and then, to make sure we're both safe, and so they can share their findings, but they keep missing the meet-ups.

It was fine at first, with them trailing people and being very careful, only drawing a few confused responses, but then they started falling out of contact. They shrug it off, insisting nothing's wrong and they must have been busy, but…

They're less sure now. When we do meet, I have to dig out the photos we took and walk them through everything that happened, and they're still sceptical. They promise they'll keep looking, but I'm not sure how much of that is just humouring me.

World's got strange lately. I don't catch the news much, where I'm hiding, but my friend passes stuff on when we meet, saving up newspaper clippings, sometimes even recording broadcasts for me.

That floating man from a while back has been seen more often, there are rumours of stuff straight from the pages of a comic book coming out of America and the mainland. It's just my luck, really, the moment I find something real to look into, the rest of the world gets distracted by the paranormal.

Maybe that's weighing on my friend's mind. They were never as interested in that side of things as me, but I guess people can change.

If a breakthrough doesn't come soon, then I think I'll lose them entirely. Then the investigation's as good as dead unless a new lead just falls into my lap. I still have faith though, they'll find something if I wait a little while longer.

> \recovered_posts\report8.txt

keep_an_eye posted “Danger” to Personal News:

They were gone too long without any word. I should have fled, but I still hoped…

My old collaborator returned from their undercover investigation, arriving at my hiding place without warning. Something had happened to them, I could tell. They looked through me, not at me, ignored my questions and went rooting for our notes, our pictures, our footage, everything we gathered.

Then they started destroying it all. Threw the papers into the sink, ripped up the film, then started looking for stuff to make a fire with.

They yelled at me, telling me I was delusional, that I wasted my time, our time, and it was all a load of nonsense. The only time they stopped destroying our evidence was when I asked what happened and they just roared at me that nothing happened.

Nothing was wrong.

That wasn’t my friend speaking. It was their face and their voice alright, but the eyes I knew from somewhere else. From the detective, from some of the witnesses who turned violent.

I understand now. No, I don’t understand, but this is bad, this is wrong. This is dangerous, and I need to go.

I might have spent too much time making this post, my old friend knew enough about this board to maybe find me if I take too long. They’re gone now.

I need to run. I’m going completely dark until I find somewhere safe, somewhere they don’t know of. If such a place exists, with all we shared.

Goodbye.

> \recovered_posts\report9.txt

keep_an_eye posted "Farewell" to Personal News:

This is goodbye.

After posting this, I'm using an exploit I found a while ago to remove my access to this board. Permanently. If anyone claims to be me, ignore them. For your own safety.

For those who don't know, I was investigating a string of strange events with a friend. We found evidence that people were being made to take part in, and cover up, illegal acts. Relatively minor ones, but still.

I missed the warning signs.

When questioned, people involved at first acted confused. They claimed no knowledge of the events described, and wouldn't entertain the possibility that they really happened.

Then they would become angry when approached. It didn't take any kind of accusation, just the suggestion that something had occurred would turn them hostile, rejecting the idea outright.

At some point, denial and anger wasn't enough and they were driven to actively destroy evidence. That's what happened to the material we sent to law enforcement, and to the original copies of everything we gathered.

After that? Violence. People with no history of aggression going from calm, normal, to determined assault in the blink of an eye. The moment I raised the issue with these people, they grabbed anything in arm's reach and hurled or swung it at me. Failing that, they resorted to their bare hands.

I did more digging, very quietly. Now that I know what to look for, I can find them, news reports of ordinary people convicted of vicious assault, of murder, who can't explain why they did it. You can find them too, if you look.

Look, and you'll find the incidents are spreading, from one town to the next.

I typed up copies of the relevant articles. I made copies of all our notes, actually. While my old friend was undercover, I had a lot of time to myself, and I spent it scanning and storing everything on my hard drive, burning it onto discs to be safe.

It's all on here too. I know we're not supposed to use this board like this, but I had to be certain. I had to be sure this information would outlive me. If I did it right, it'll outlive this board as well.

I can't even trust myself anymore. Or, at least, I can't trust who I'll be in the future.

All those people started normal. But at some point they were possessed, somehow, to hide any sign that something strange had happened. I cried wolf in the past, but I'm no fool. Whatever is happening, it took my friend from me. It took one of my oldest, closest friends and made them into that… thing, that angry, spiteful, thing that looked at me with a stranger's eyes. I'm not safe.

If you're reading this. You know who you are. If you're still in there, somewhere, I'm so sorry. We should have been more careful, less reckless.

To everyone else: trust your gut. If something seems wrong, don't let anyone tell you otherwise. Look after your loved ones. Be careful. Stay safe.

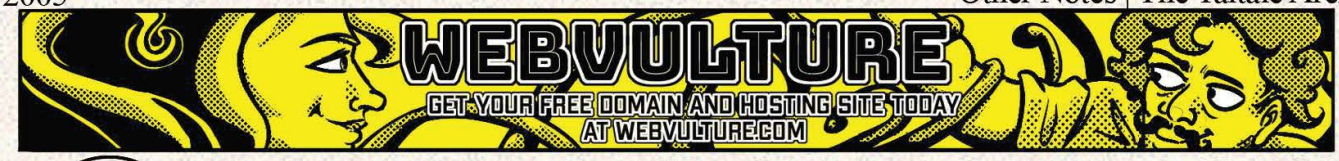
Keep an eye out.

> ~unresolved_cases\strangers\keep_an_eye\recovered_records

- 142 files in this directory.

- Delete all? y/n

> ▯



The Taitale Archives

Thank you to sebsebseb@hotmail.com for providing many of hte issues we were missing of the Concerned CitiZine. He asked that we include this note about its history. —Chris

I found this zine here online a few days ago. I'm finally sufficiently cough cough medicated so here goes.
The Concerned CitiZine was a zine written by Anthony Johnson, myself, and a few others which ran for over a decade. Anth started it in high school, but I came up with the idea.

We met freshman year of high school. I ate alone, I was a broody punk kid in a small school of uptight assholes. Nobody wanted to talk to me until this excited rail-thin motherfucker sat down next to me and asked me what I was listening to.

It was a bootleg cassette of the Sex Pistols I'd scammed from a local record store. Over crunchy guitar riffs, they screamed about darkly magical forces: fascism, abortion, insanity. The world was turning inwards, and monsters were hiding in plain sight.

Music always came with extra stuff: posters and stickers and little booklets. Someone had folded up a copy of the Anarchy in the UK zine and slipped it in. It had a tiny No1 in the corner and was written by some fans.

I didn't really see it as advertising. To me it seemed like it was just spreading a message, screaming it out there. I didn't know what it was, and I didn't know what message I should be screaming, but I wanted my throat to be raw. So when Anth told me he was gonna write a whole manifesto, I talked him into making it a zine instead, something where he could put multiple issues out.

So he wrote the first one all on his own and added that little No1 in the corner. He talked about his visions. I don't know what he saw, if he saw anything at all. Part of me kinda thought it was a metaphor honestly. Or like cops, but worse. I'm not really sure anymore, memory's kinda hazy. But I know a big part of me just wanted to stick it to the authorities, and I thought it was fucking funny, him going on and on completely straight-faced about flying people.

Even after that first one, he still did most of the writing. He had so much to say, not really much new month to month, but lots of it. I'd write up a few articles every issue, like talk about Pope John Paul I and Vatican corruption, and end each with a call to arms. Mostly I'd take photos. We'd get other contributions, but they were all over the place. The zine was a mix of punk, anarchism, scifi, and Anth.

Then Scion appeared. My mind was fucking blown. This thin excitable kid who'd been talking so much shit was actually right about this? There was no way. Suddenly it was a lot less of a joke.

I put a lot more time into it. We were both out of school at that point, with him working at his parent's diner and me just living. More people started to listen to us, and a few became good friends. My parents kicked me out, and his were telling him he needed to find his own place, so we got a small apartment and were roommates. I slept on the couch next to the typewriter we used and under my

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The Taitale Archives

negatives. Didn't have a real dark room, so we just blacked the windows out with a bunch of laminated menus from his work.

After people first saw the man floating off the coast, nothing much really happened. More sightings trickled in. At the very beginning, Scion didn't do anything, which frustrated Anth. He thought the golden man was going to come and speak to him personally, and that never happened. Anth bounced up and down and down. He told me over and over that he knew he was on the edge of something.

When the rumors of other capes became reality, he put out five issues in one year. People wanted to read what we were writing! Word of mouth spread enough that we were mailing as far as New York. One guy paid extra to get a copy sent to Alaska every few months.

We went from loners to leaders of a small community. Anthony's writings had attracted people in similar situations to ours, who thought we had answers to everything.

I left in 1990.

Even with all those years living and working together, it always felt like there was a bit of distance between me and Anth. He was always so hesitant to just talk about stuff, and took everything super personally.

Whatever it was, by the late 80s he couldn't handle it anymore. He started complaining about my writing and dropping hints about rent and caring about the fact that I was crashing at his place. And you know, I am sorry for that. I thought we could create our own utopia, and I made him do the worst part of the work for it.

I know exactly how his temper kept him from keeping other jobs and how much he hated having to work for his parents. I haven't talked to my parents in years. I know exactly how it feels to be stuck under their boot. I was wrong to secure my escape by forcing him back into the cage.

The group split. Our little community moved away from Anthony and interest in superpowers in general. Over time, even that little group began to dissolve, though I'm still in contact with Devin and Lucy and a few others. I moved on with my life.

Getting away from Anthony gave me the space to clear my mind and really realize that I just wasn't interested in conspiracy theories anymore. I still think that the government is oppressive and state violence is fucked up and everything, but I just don't think the ideas we had in our teens and early twenties led anywhere.

Even after I left, I subscribed to the zine under an assumed name. I didn't want him knowing I was still reading it, but I also didn't want to completely lose something that had been such a big part of my life for ten years. I collected issues until they stopped, but I could never bring myself to read them. I hope someone else can get a glimpse of the past from the ones I'm submitting here.

1980 No1

THE CONCERNED CITIZINE

By Anthony

1/10

1980 No1

I started this zine to talk about something that happened to me. It's something that's effecting the whole world probably. It happened when I was young but I'll work my way back to it.

About ~~a week ago~~ A MONTH NOW! I was walking home in the dark from my late shift when I heard something behind me. The street lights were dim and I was still a few blocks away from home. I knew someone had to be following me.

THREATENS TO BREAK NEW WIND IN RADICAL REPORTAGE!

I wasn't scared. I've seen the Chinese Connection. I walked without looking back for the length of a street. The footsteps behind me only grew louder. Whoever it was, he wasn't stopping. I turned around to see him bundled up, one arm in his jacket, standing by an alleyway entrance.

He was a thief I could tell from the way he held himself and I started to get a little anxious when I realized that the hidden arm stuck in the coat had to be holding a knife. I can fight with my fists or even my feet but I don't carry anything sharp on me when going to work. I don't want to get fired.

It didn't matter. In a flash of red and blue, he was gone down the alleyway. I could hear the noise. He wasn't running, he'd been pulled there by someone else.

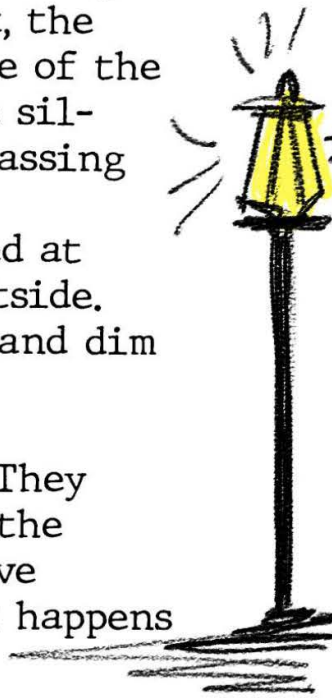
That's when it came back to me. Like dredging up the memory of a dream, ripped from my mind by the force of waking, leaving only ragged edges.

It didn't make sense at first, but over the next few days I began to remember more and more, until I could close my eyes and see it clearly, details sketching themselves in, dissimilar bits coming together and eventually beginning to feel right and slot into place and make sense.

I couldn't situate the image at first. There was a man in a suit. I knew he could fly through the air and leap between buildings, but in the picture that I turned over in my head and tried to tease apart, he crouches at the top of a yellow brick building. A blonde in a trench coat plummets, her leg wrapped in rope stretching up into his hand. Her fall stops before she hits the ground, and in the next moment she dangles limply, her

back at an unnatural angle.

As I prodded at this over the days following my alley-way encounter, I began to hear sounds. The sickening crack of her neck and back as she bottomed out, the howl of wind through an empty city, the silence of the costumed man at the top. I saw his red and blue silhouette. I felt the old fear again, as if I was passing below and looking up for the first time.
I'm not sure how I got there. I must have escaped at night, when I was 8. Left my room to wander outside. The whole memory is tinged with disobedience and dim yellow light cutting through deep darkness.



I don't know how it ends. That part is missing. They must have taken it when they took the rest of the memory, and no matter how often or how hard I've thought about it, I can't begin to guess at what happens next.

All I know now is that he's back. He was probably never gone. I doubt he's alone. Sometimes when I listen at night, I can hear them out there. Going at speeds that shouldn't be possible. Its shaken out other memories. Smaller incidents that I've been driven to reexamine.

Nobody else has talked about this. The big newspapers are silent. I think the authorities don't know about it, but Sebastian says they have to be covering it up. So I write this because I know it is my duty.

1981 No4

THE CONCERNED CITIZINE

Edited by Anthony and Seb

Witches, Demons, or Man Transcended? Thoughts On My Visions
by Anthony Johnson
Starspawn: A Fresh Take On Aliens Among Us
by Beatrix H. Emery
New Age And Old Lurkers: Its In All Of Us
by Anthony Johnson
UFOs, The Quantum, And FBI Schemes
by Sebastian
The Message They Gave Me (I Listened!)
by Anthony Johnson
BONUS: A Letter From The President

HE WAS SUPPOSED TO BE WATCHING FOR FLASHES OF COLOR IN THE NIGHT BUT BY THE TIME I CAME BACK, HE WAS OUT, SNOOZING ON THE JOB, A TRIED AND TRUE ANARCHIST!

1/22

1982 No9

Goldie Reappears, Watches Basketball Game! Soviets Fume

Rapture? Jesus Comes Back To Us Through The Eye Of A Needle

The Messiah Is Here!

THE CONCERNED CITIZINE

Atheist Converts On The Spot! Golden Man Lauded As Savior

A Central Figure, Who Is In Control?
By Anthony Johnson

SPECIAL ISSUE

GILDED GUILD! The True Story Of Our New Jesus

Man Shot Flying Off C[illegible], Scientists Baffled

Refuting The Jesus Thesis

The Gold Man And The Sea

REST OF THE WORLD FINALLY

NOTICES: THEY'RE HERE!!

Gravity Is Nothing To Them
By Anthony Johnson

Encounters Beyond Our Understanding:
Five Interviews

WHAT WE ALREADY KNEW (P13)
WHAT TO DO NEXT (P27)

Is He The Only One?

The Feds Are Hiding Something
By Sebastian

Boston Lays Claim To Golden Man

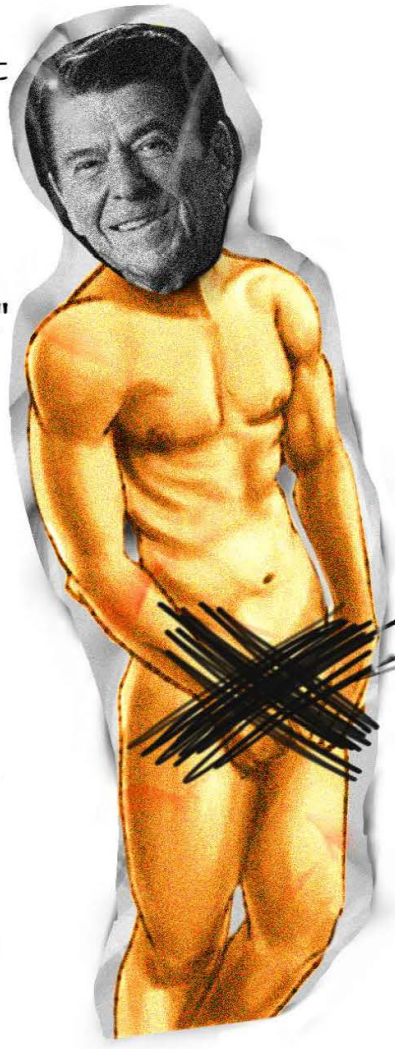
Edited by Anthony and Seb

1/34

THE FUTURE is HERE, LISTEN!

1985 No32

If you've been reading from the first issue, you know my predictions. I saw this all long before the golden man appeared. If you haven't been with us since back then, write to the zine and we will send you previous issues for a small fee (Except for 21, which we lost all the copies of after I let Seb try to tidy things up. Never let an anarchist organize anything!). I've been sending this zine out since 1980. Copies have ended up in all sorts of people's hands. My mother has one from the very first print run, which I have not "tampered" with or even touched really. You can trust me on this.



Everyone knows about the floating man. There's no doubt in anyone's mind that he's real. BUT, some people still don't get that he's only the beginning. I think it's obvious.

I was talking to Seb about it yesterday. He thinks that the golden man is a "symptom of societal change", which I agree with, but he also thinks that he's being put on by the government as some sort of play. A tool of "oppression" and "stratificitiation." He sees the golden man as a sort of bigger fish that could swallow up any of the others (us). So he says the golden man has to be government violence.

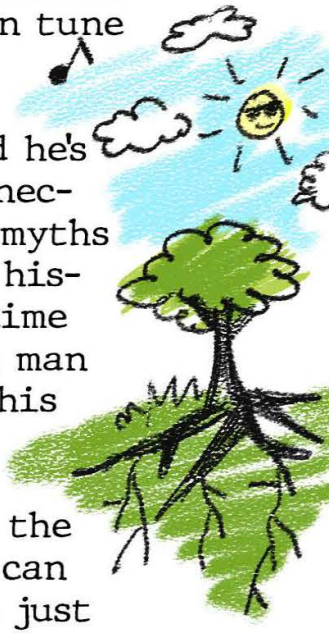
I think it's simpler than that. I think the government is not behind the sudden appearance. They didn't make the golden man, even if they probably drew him out. I think it's much, much simpler than that. The golden man is the image of something in every single one of us. We all feel tremblings of this force in our emotions, in nature's habits, in the miracles of things like magnetism. It's proof of the eternity of the human self. Like what some people call the soul but brought out into the actual world. The golden man has just broken through from that realm into our own or from ours into that one.

Sometimes, I think there is more than one golden man, they just all look the same, and only one comes out of wherever they are to talk to us at a time. I know they can look different, if they chose to. I've seen others before the golden man even appeared. But right now, they're hiding again except for messengers all dressed the same to avoid confusing us too much.

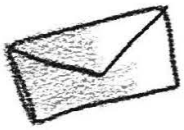
What I really don't like is that I knew the details before they took my memory again. I was cleaning up at the diner today and trying to remember again but the details are so fuzzy and they change sometimes when I'm not looking. I think they can all fly and shoot things but that

doesn't mean they are all the same when they're together. They dress up in all sorts of wonderful ways and participate in group rituals to communicate with each other and the forces that underlie everything. They're more in tune than we've ever been!

When I told Seb this, he said "Dude, that's wild." And he's right. There's a wilderness aspect to all this, a connection back to mother earth. And her golden son. All myths have roots in reality. The stories of Christ weren't historical, they were predictive! Repeating bits, like time looping around again. We all knew about the golden man for thousands of years, even if nobody but me saw this age coming.



The golden men are just the beginning. We all have the potential inside ourselves to be just like them. We can push through and get in touch with that energy. We just have to figure out how.



SEBASTIAN OUT ON THE STREETS, GETTING OUR MESSAGE OUT. HE ALWAYS HAS THE FUNNIEST WAYS OF PUTTING THINGS!

ARE WE "CORRUPTING" THE YOUTH?

Our little zine made the 6 O'clock news last week, just in time for us to write a response article in our latest run of the Concerned CitiZine. Chris Lehrer did an investigative reporting segment. He looked through back copies of our zine (never showing much of it on screen, I wonder why!), talked to a few high schoolers about what they thought of our publication, and then made a bunch of terrible guesses about how we print and distribute this thing. I want to set the record straight.

First, teenagers are the most downtrodden, voiceless group in society. Teens have so much to say and instead society locks them in schools and throws away the key. Here, we give them that voice, at least in the context of powers, heroes, and the new wave of change that is sweeping the entire world. We give them a voice in the arena where the most is happening right now. History is being made, and we give them a slice of that.

Traditional homebodies and regular "professional" media are afraid of what's going on. They're afraid of letting kids know the truth. So they take what we say and they cover it up with their words. They say we're "peddling conspiracies." Giving "false hope." "Preying on comics obsessed kids." What are they so afraid of that they have to come up with a thousand ways to say shut up? We're all going the same way heroes and villains and the powered are going. We're all getting in touch with that inner light, and these people want to smash that very real hope.

And why did they have to make up stories about us? We never steal from print shops (Though Seb has mentioned the idea ha ha!). We have to charge a very small price in order to afford the copies legally. And no, we don't make a single cent of profit. In fact, we lose money with every run because we want to keep the zine affordable to everyone.

We get contributions from around the community, but most of the work is done by me and a little by Seb. Every night after I come home from the diner, I think and I type and I talk to my friend about what else to include in this zine. It comes from the heart, not a place of hate. We're not a mouthpiece for anybody, just a voice!

And the thing is: They can't stop us! They'll keep trying and trying but we have the truth on our side. We're a light for the lost, a beacon for seekers!

I STARTED THIS WHOLE ZINE AND I SURE AS HELL WILL BE THE ONE WHO DECIDES WHEN IT ENDS, NOT SOME TRUMPED UP NEWSCASTER WHO CAN'T EVEN GET HIS FACTS STRAIGHT!
GET! OUT! OF! MY! HOUSE! —Anthony

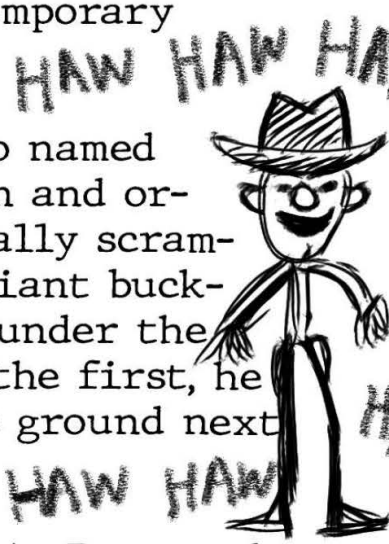
3/38

WHAT'S BEHIND THE MASK?

1990 No65

So-called heroes have been showing up the past few years, displaying a wide variety of powers and abilities, and acting as a new kind of vigilante cop. They work beyond the government, but they don't fall behind any philosophy or idea. They're not here for us. They're here for themselves. But I'll get to that later. First I want to tell you what happened a week ago.

As I look for other opportunities, I'm tiding myself over with a diner job. I clean up tables, mop the floor, refill people's cups, and so forth. Nothing crazy, but it's quiet temporary work and it lets me think.



Last week, we were visited by an out of town hero named Sheriff. He was mostly polite at first. He sat down and ordered a breakfast burrito (new item for us, basically scrambled eggs but it's a wrap) and a beer. He wears a giant bucket hat which he tilted down while stuffing food under the bandana tied around his face. After he finished the first, he threw the aluminum foil and used napkins on the ground next to him and demanded another.

We brought him one, and I went to get the broom. As I started sweeping up what he'd dropped, he threw even more onto the pile, like he thought he was in a cartoon. I could imagine the yeehaw he must have wanted to yell. I stared at him briefly but kept cleaning and he said "What? I'm used to Texas roadhouses!" and laughed.

This is the sort of person who becomes a so-called hero. This is the sort of power hungry smug lunatic who gets powers and pushes himself into everyone else's business to ruin their days. He's nothing like the golden man, and he's nothing like who he could be.

So what is it that chooses him and not anyone else? What plan possibly needs the smuggest and stupidest? I think it's because they're not real, not in the same way the golden man is.

This guy is a government plant. He seems like he's only here to push down the rest of us, and that's because he is only here to push down the rest of us! He's one of many monitoring us for real signs of abilities and talents to get us to want to turn ourselves in. He's here to trick us into revealing what we can do as soon as we learn how to do it.

Don't fall for it.

16/22

The world woke up into a deeper sleep, I'm starting to think. White-washed, pastel colors, capes and pageantry. We've been deceived tenfold.

I think they're hiding the truth again behind an elaborate lie. The "capes" we see out in the wild are nothing like the golden man, who remains unknowable, continues to wander. Capes are a fiction, a construct purpose-built to oppose humanity's awakening.

If capes were the real deal, then why wouldn't those granted early visions be given powers? I think the key is in the memories that were stolen. It was never the same entity that gave visions as the one who took them away. Two separate ones, opposites! One to reach out to me, and one to intercept.

The real golden men are not government plants. They have nothing to do with violence or the state or oppression or anything. They are our salvation, still reaching for us. But something has managed to construct a shield between us and them. And we're suffering for it, torn apart.

How can you all not see it???

I've been trying to finish this issue for a few weeks now, but I just don't have it in me. I think this is going to be the last one.

As of this morning only one person has replied with the postage for their copy and I was planning on mailing them out tomorrow. Johnny Rotten, I don't know who you are, but for your last issue, since I can't deliver on the usual content, I'll tell you a story about the end of this zine.

A few years ago I lived with a friend named Sebastian. I don't know how long you've been following this zine, but he was a big contributor to it, the first person other than me to ever write an article for it. He and his friends were a part of my life for years. I live alone now, and I bet you can see from this issue that I'm the only one still writing this.

Sebastian was my first and best and only friend, and I threw that away for nothing. I've gone over the last time we talked a hundred times. I've replayed every little gesture that I remember, everything I said and how I failed. I've thought a lot since he left of how I could have better phrased things.

Over the years I've come to believe that a large part of the problem was a lack of understanding on my part. I knew he couldn't

and didn't handle criticism well, but I didn't see the roots of it until later. See, I think he was always rebelling, against his parents who called him out so much, and against a society that pushed him down, so when I tried to be helpful and point things out about his photos or articles or even the sorts of people he brought in, he pasted those other faces, his mom's, his teachers', over mine.

And every time we talked, he built up these walls to defend against it all. Every time, before we even started talking, he already had an end in mind, every decision taken from me and made in advance. All that was left was the attempt to convince me, push me down his path to a place he saw as safe. I know I overreacted, but it reminded me so strongly of how my memory of those first visions had been taken from me, which he knew about with how much I talked about it in the zine.

To have that happen again, but this time with my best friend stepping into the role, it hurt a lot.

I didn't know how to tell him this back then, so when we talked, I talked about the group. I said that I didn't feel like they were my friends, only his, and he looked hurt, but it was true! They were only there for him. I was a joke for them all to mooch off of. The community he built around us was something for him to be part of and something to suffocate me.

Once, I saw them laughing over an article I'd written, together, without me. When I asked him to explain what was so funny, I saw his friends crack up even more. And I think all of it was a great joke to them, just a way to meet people. I hated it. I thought it was actually important, and he'd just make it out to be just a side project, on the same level as taking photos or spraying graffiti.

I know that certain things set me off, and I know that my reactions were a little over the top. I guess I must have looked crazy to him, with how I couldn't explain why I was reacting like that. I guess I should have written it out instead of trying to confront him directly, but now it's too late. I don't really know where I'm going with this, Mr. Rotten, but I'm tired now so thanks for reading and best of luck.

Anthony Johnson

CAPE ILLUSTRATED

THE FASHION ISSUE

Meet PARIAN, rogue cape pursuing fashion design
PG 7

HERO COSTUMES *through the ages*
PG 46

7 tips to make your own cape outfit
PG 28

Win one of LEGEND'S old costumes!

Photographed by Rose Lambton

ICONIC

LIFESTYLES OF THE RICH AND FEARLESS

Young, bold, and talented—these kids are making their mark. Teen heirs Gabriel, Owen, and Olivia Delaunay allow a glimpse into the dazzling day-to-day of Danbury's newest hero team, Icon.

By Raiko Toho
Photography by Elle

On a snowy Saturday morning, Owen Delaunay spends two minutes unlocking the front door before showing me into the family manor. "Need to debug the cryptograph," he explains. "I can't disarm it right now so make sure you don't step on anything burlywood-colored."

One glance at the foyer will tell you that the Delaunays are quite well-off. There's dark wood paneling the walls and a candle chandelier; three hallways lead to separate wings and the wide staircase climbs two stories up. The foyer is tiled with pale marble. Despite having never seen a burlywood, I arrive safely at a sitting room, where I'm greeted by the remaining Delaunay siblings. Gabriel Delaunay, the oldest, is still in high school, though he turns eighteen next January. Owen and Olivia are a year younger—twins. The three have been heroes for as long as eleven months, operating independently across the New York metropolitan area.

Previous spread
Left to right: Talos, Galatea, Gargoyle. Masks and makeup: Sandbox SFX. Clothing: custom by Lighthouse. Bracer, boots, gloves, lariat: their own.

Domino Magazine: *So, give me the rundown. Cape name, powers, one fun fact.*

Owen Delaunay: *Oh no.*

Olivia Delaunay: *I'm Galatea. My power has a couple of parts: a minor thinker rating that lets me know when I'm being watched, and I have a… let's call it a signal flare that gets people's attention and makes anyone looking at me freeze for like, a second. I can run a mile in stilettos.*

DM: *Are you sure that's not your real power?*

OL: *[laughs] It's a valuable skill that anyone can learn. Your turn, Gabe.*

Gabriel Delaunay: *Gargoyle. I turn into a different form with thick skin and some enhanced abilities. I think they call it shifter or…*

DM: *Changer.*

GD: *That's the one. And I have a sandwich named after me at the deli downtown.*

DM: *Nice! Owen?*

OW: *Okay, I'm Talos. I'm a tinker who specializes in fortifications.*

DM: *And your fun fact?*

OW: *I'm, ah, I don't—I can never think of a good one.*

OL: *Favorite jellybean flavor.*

OW: *Blueberry. Oh god! That's so boring.*

Olivia tells me she was the first to venture out in costume, after discovering her powers on a ski trip. "I actually made an appearance at the resort in Utah," she says. "I don't expect anything's been connected to me, though. There are a lot of people running around ski resorts with masks on." Sure enough, the area has no record of any cape activity at the time, and as a rookie, she went relatively unnoticed for several months. She was fairly cautious starting out, Olivia remembers. She had to learn how to take advantage of an ability unsuited to combat. Galatea is, however, credited by the NYPD with a few dozen solo takedowns, primarily non-parahumans with no gang affiliation, and made a name for herself last April with a key role in resolving the Ulysses S. Grant High School shooting. "That was kind of a wake-up call. I saw how much more effective I could be," Olivia says. "I collaborated more with other teams, and started thinking about starting one myself." Did she consider *joining* a team, the Wards or an independent group? "I did, and I have nothing but good things to say about the heroes I worked with, but I hadn't found that perfect fit."

> **I have nothing but good things to say about the heroes I worked with, but I hadn't found that perfect fit.**

It was around this time, in the summer of 2009, that an enigmatic new hero came onto the scene. He quickly gained legendary status, partly from the sheer frequency of his fights, but mostly because he never spoke and always vanished before law enforcement could arrive. Gabriel denies deliberately cultivating this air of mystery. "I certainly had some fun with it," he admits. "But the truth is, I stayed transformed every time I went on patrol, and my changer form just isn't capable of speech." The wrong kind of vocal cords, apparently, though he also jokes that the extra teeth would probably give him a terrible lisp. His bestial appearance combined with the inability to introduce himself gave him the nickname Gargoyle, which he eventually adopted in an official capacity. Gabriel says that he wouldn't have chosen the name, "but I've been told I don't have the best judgement in that department." Olivia and Owen happily volunteer that as a boy, Gabriel named his puppy Eidoglon. He still stands by it. "It's an honor," he insists. "I would love it if someone called their pet Dogoyle."

Their names aren't quite that well-known yet—Talos, especially. Unlike his siblings, Owen did not start his career as a solo cape. "Tinkers need a bit

◀ Gabriel (right) and Owen (left) have very different approaches to hero work.

more, you know, a bit more prep time than most," he explains. "I got powers before Olivia, even, but I spent all that time working on building something I could take into the field." Gathering materials wasn't such an issue, but he had to fight against his specialty. Despite a broad range of effects, the practical applications were limited: "I was having such a hard time getting anything portable," Owen says, sighing. He debuted only five weeks ago under the umbrella of their team, Icon, when the siblings went public with their civilian names.

Domino Magazine: *Let's talk a bit about Icon. How did you decide to form the team? When did you tell each other about your powers?*

Gabriel Delaunay: *I'd say it was less tell, more show.*

DM: *Oh?*

Olivia Delaunay: *Well, I didn't expect to need my costume for a trip to Danbury Fair…*

DM: *Wait, hang on. Was this on the day of the attack?*

OL: *Right. So when the Teeth barricaded themselves in the restaurant I really just went for it.*

Owen Delaunay: *Without telling us first, as Gabe mentioned.*

OL: *I knew they'd try to stop me if I gave them any warning. My power is good at drawing fire, so I had to get away from the crowd.*

DM: *Sounds a little risky for someone without a brute rating.*

OL: *I had something in mind for that, but luckily Gargoyle intervened before I had to use it.*

GD: *I did warn Owen first, by the way.*

OL: *Square.*

DM: *And Owen, how did you react to both your siblings revealing their superpowers right in front of you?*

OW: *I was just like, I can't sit in the corner while those two are fighting the freakin' Teeth! And I had my prototype laser grid matrix on me, which I hadn't thought was ready to use, but it turns out bullets make a really good case for field testing.*

OL: *Once Talos had the civilians protected, it was pretty easy to wrap up.*

DM: *And, just to be clear—in the course of one afternoon, you all went from having no idea that the others were capes to announcing your new team at a press conference.*

OL: *[laughs] What can I say? We get things done.*

I fully expect that Icon will prove a worthwhile endeavor.

DM: *Well, Icon is certainly on the list of capes to watch. Some people are even calling you the new New Wave.*

GD: *So, I'm sure you would agree that we've been—*

OW: *Gabe—*

GD: *—making waves?*

OL/OW: *GABRIEL!*

New Wave—an extended family turned powerhouse cape team, living unmasked in nearby Brockton Bay. Operating on a platform of transparency, the movement lost its impact when one of their members was killed. So does Icon have any concerns about giving up the protection of secret identities? Evidently not. Owen enthusiastically tells me that the grounds have been extensively modified—in addition to defenses against large-scale attacks and natural disasters, he's built up layers of internal security to prevent unauthorized entry. "It's a challenge," he says, "with everything that parahumans are, or might be, capable of. But it's also a lot of fun to work on. I'm always upgrading the system with new sensors and takedown options." When I ask what would happen if I stepped on a burlywood tile, Olivia interrupts the answer to suggest I would be happier not knowing. Helpfully, she also identifies the color so I can avoid finding out. None of the siblings seem fazed by the idea of living inside a building riddled with ambiguously hazardous traps. You get used to it, apparently.

"They're going to do something incredible." Michael Delaunay calls me from his corner office at Gallerie, Inc. to tell me what he thinks of his children's new venture. "I've taught the boys how to run a business,"—a cape team, he believes, *is* a business—"and I fully expect that Icon will prove a worthwhile endeavor." It'll be good experience for the future: Delaunay plans to keep Gallerie in the family, and sees no reason why his heir couldn't manage both the team and the company. "My children have already proven that cape activities will not distract from their education or their futures," he says. It's a shame about the football, though.

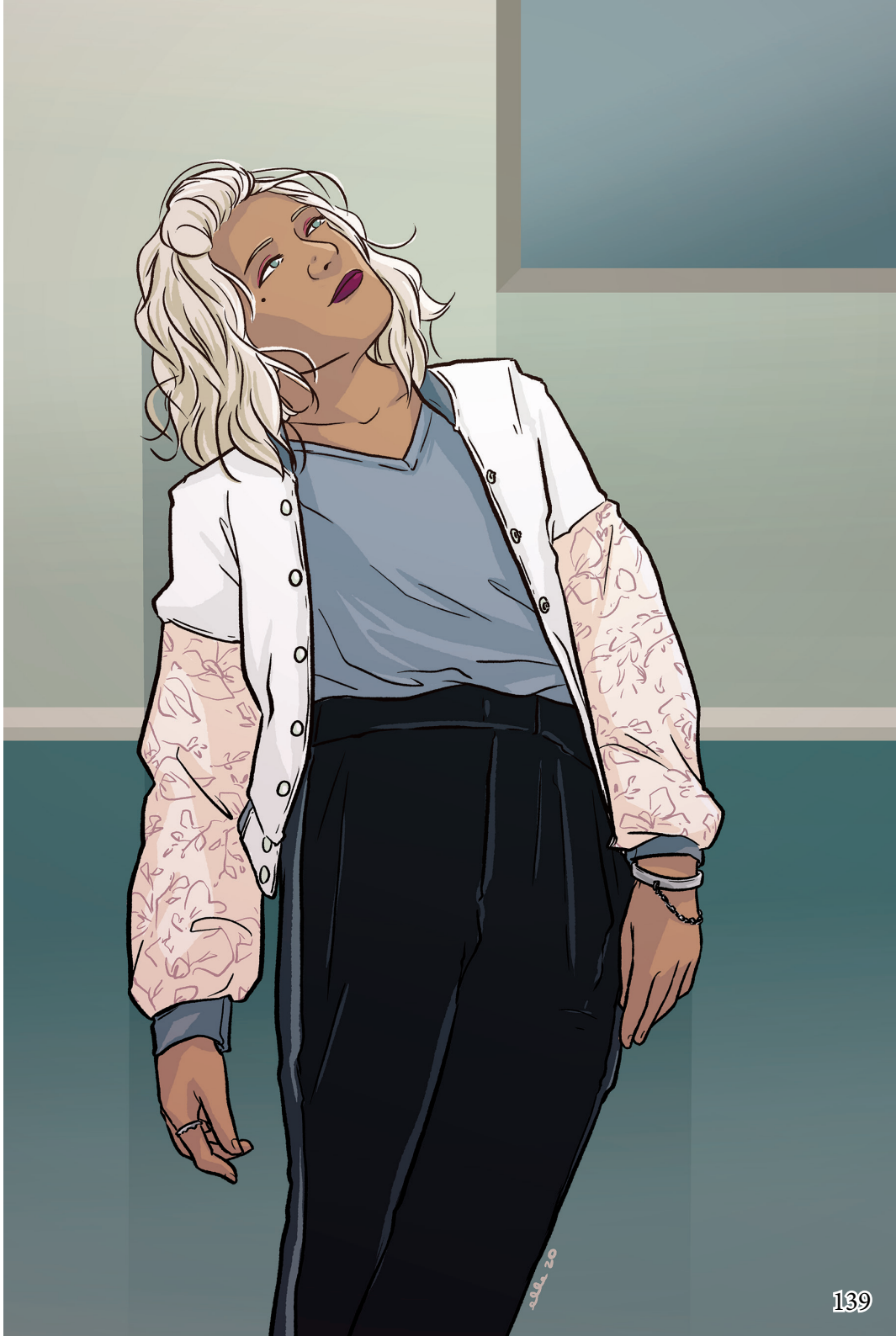
Gabriel excels at football. He shows me a shelf lined with MVP trophies and a massive award for leading the Wooster Generals to an undefeated season his junior year. The sport, he adds, has made him a local legend and immortalized him at Earl's Deli, but he's no longer allowed to play it. In fact, the team was forced to drop out of the 2009 season after Gargoyle's unmasking, which was understandably discouraging. "On the bright side," he says, "I have time to try new things." Gabriel fences now—not competitively, unless you count his training rivalry with Olivia. He takes down the fully sharpened sword mounted next to the trophy shelf and challenges me to a duel, which, naturally, I refuse.

Olivia's everyday life hasn't changed much since her identity was revealed. ▶

(A few days later, I contact Wooster School's Coach August Witt for the details, and learn that the entire incident is "total bull." He tells me that at the high school level, there's no regulation against parahumans competing in sports—only the use of parahuman powers is prohibited. "Gabe was good before he got powers. He says he never used them during games, and I believe him," Witt declares. "I've seen pictures of Gargoyle, anyway, and the refs would definitely have noticed." But other schools complained about the possibility, so Gabriel had to go. The Generals have, however, managed to hold onto Owen for next year. "We need at least one Delaunay on the team, and I don't care what anyone says. If that kid wanted to cheat, he'd figure out how to do it whether he's playing or not.")

What other changes have public identities brought to their civilian lives? "They pay a lot more attention, for a start." That's something Olivia knows for a fact, no matter how cool her audience plays it. "Everything I do has weight to it," she admits, "but honestly, it's not as different as you might expect." She still shops at Danbury Fair, still attends student council meetings, still rides horses and posts selfies and dances at charity galas. To Olivia, after living a double life for almost a year, unmasking is not so much worlds colliding as cars merging into traffic. Owen, on the other hand, has moved closer to the hero side of things. He prefers to spend his time tinkering—when he's not redesigning the manor systems, he's working with community leaders to upgrade security in local businesses and public spaces. Wearable tech is shelved for now, with teammates to watch his back in the field, though he hasn't given up on it entirely.

Despite their notable impact on the high school sports scene, Icon's presence in Danbury is undeniably positive. Crime has always been low in the



Cooperation is so important to what we do.

area, coming from unpowered lawbreakers and the occasional villain passing through; now, between Talos' hard work and regular street patrols, the town is safer than ever. These days, most of the action takes place in New York City, where there's plenty of work to go around, and plenty of opportunities to work with other heroes.

Paladin, leader of Lightspeed Entertainment's Team Constant, emails me about her experience fighting alongside Icon. "The thing that stands out the most," she writes, "is their precision. Those tactics don't leave a lot of room for mistakes, so you can't go in unprepared unless you want to get caught in the middle." She means Galatea's "signal flare" specifically, which will stop enemies and allies alike. But that isn't to say that team-ups are impossible: Paladin attests that with time to set up and strategize, Icon is a force you want on your side. "They specialize in protecting civilians, if they can't be evacuated for whatever reason. Sometimes we run into that kind of situation, where the villains are digging in and the danger isn't immediate, and we'll invite Icon to lend a hand. They always rise to the challenge."

Olivia Delaunay: *I actually had my first run-in with Constant…it must have been my second month out. Paladin definitely got caught in my power a few times so it's nice to hear she has such a high opinion now.*

Domino Magazine: *Tell me more about these tactics she mentioned. Is it like, an overall fighting style, or is there a particular incident you could talk about?*

OL: *Well, we're all suited to different things so I guess you could say we have a style. Mostly it's about timing and coordination, and there are a few setups that we practice specifically.*

Owen Delaunay: *But when we're teaming up, we have to figure stuff out beforehand, so we can let everyone else know what to expect when someone says, I dunno. Blueberry forty-two or whatever.*

DM: *So who makes the calls? Gabriel, putting that quarterback experience to use?*

Gabriel Delaunay: *[laughs] Sure, I have the experience, but it'd be a tough game if the quarterback couldn't talk.*

DM: *Oh! Right, of course.*

GD: *I do help out with the pre-battle strategies, though, and with the signals and formations.*

OW: *The last part's a team effort. We're always changing the signals and formations. Gotta keep 'em guessing.*

OL: *It's a lot of prep work, but it pays off.*

DM: *It really does! Icon has gone a long way in such a short time. So now that you're established as a team, what do you have planned for the future?*

GD: *Merchandise!*

OL: *That's a joke.*

GD: *Wishful thinking, really.*

OL: *I'm looking forward to visiting other cities, maybe expanding our reach a little, and meeting new heroes. I think getting that kind of experience is a great way to learn, and cooperation is so important to what we do.*

OW: *And it's still a little early to announce, but I'm close to a breakthrough on my latest project, so you might see something big coming up in the next few months.*

OL: *Basically, we're just getting started.* ∞

Let The Light Back In

Sheffield, England, June 1992

"I see someone's got a face on. Let me guess, you can't find your shoes either."

Rosa jerked her head up, butterflies flapping up a storm in her stomach as she met Malika's amused gaze. It was as if the crowd of people jostling around them receded into the distance, like it was just the two of them standing there.

"R— Right," she said, cringing inside at the stutter but plunging on like everything was normal, like absolutely nothing at all had changed between them. "I swear I left them right here. How does this always happen to me?" To emphasise her point, she directed a fearsome glower down at the haphazard collection of footwear spilling over the hopelessly inadequate rack to form a large puddle on the floor.

Mal laughed, low and rich and wicked, closing the distance between them to bump her shoulder against Rosa's. "Just Jum'ah things, am I right? Anyway, would a trip to the mosque really be complete without the great post-prayer shoe hunt?"

"This is so bloody annoying," Rosa groused, painfully aware of the warmth spreading from that point of contact between them, of the electricity thrumming along her nerves.

Mal laughed again. "Hey, have you heard the new Take That song?"

"Take who?"

"No, Take That. Come on, I've told you about them before."

"Have you? I must've missed it." But although Rosa tried to maintain a poker face, she just couldn't do it. "Yeah, I've heard it. Pretty catchy."

"It'll be a number one smash, you'll see." Mal hummed a few bars of It Only Takes a Minute, a dreamy look on her face. "I really want to see them live. Do you think they'll ever come to Sheffield?" But before Rosa could answer, her expression sharpened and she lunged to the side suddenly, digging into the shoe puddle like a cat scooping up a fish. Also like a cat, she radiated satisfaction as she held up her prize for inspection. "Aren't these yours?"

"Uh, yeah. Yes they are. And…" Rosa carefully stepped around Mal, bending to scoop up her own prize. "I think these are yours?"

"Well spotted."

"They're bright red. It wasn't that hard."

"All the better to pick them out of the heap. Unlike these boring things." She pulled a face as she offered Rosa's boots to her.

“They’re comfortable,” Rosa muttered, setting Mal’s shoes down in front of her so she could reclaim her boots without having to engage in an impromptu two-person juggling act. And if it felt as though sparks flared when their hands touched, well, that was obviously just her imagination working overtime.

“So?”

“So I’d rather be comfy than be a fashion victim.” She slipped her boots on and started tying the laces.

Mal was already done with her ballet flats, straightening to quirk an eyebrow at Rosa. “You know you can be comfy and fashionable, right? The two things aren’t mutually exclusive.”

“Are you sure about that?”

“Abso-tively posi-lutely. I mean, just look at me!” She struck a pose, tossing the trailing end of her hijab over her shoulder and pouting, the exaggerated seriousness of the expression belied by the amusement dancing in her eyes.

Rosa found a smile on her lips, as she so often did when she was with Mal, and it spilled over into laughter when Mal waggled her eyebrows. And then it seemed like the most natural thing in the world to say, “Want to hang out when we get back?”

Mal’s face froze, and the brief candle flame of hope that had sprung to life in Rosa’s chest was already guttering and dying even before Mal said, “I can’t, sorry.”

She was already turning away, and Rosa knew she should’ve just let it go, but instead she took a step forward, almost stumbling over her half-tied laces but too distracted to care. “Tomorrow then?” There was a part of her that wanted to cringe at how eager, almost desperate she sounded, but if it worked, if Mal said yes, then maybe they could just go back to the way things used to be before… Before. *Insha’allah,* she prayed, as fervently as she’d ever prayed for anything in her life. *I just want my best friend back.*

But Mal shook her head. “I’m busy tomorrow. Sorry. But… I’ll call you, okay?”

No you won’t.

“Okay,” Rosa said anyway, like she didn’t have to force the word out past the lump in her throat; like her heart wasn’t breaking all over again.

Mal never did call, and even though she’d expected that, the reality was somehow worse. It ached inside her like hunger as she stumbled through her weekend and sleepwalked through school.

Why won’t she talk to me? They’d always been so close, but now it was like a chasm had opened up between them and Rosa just didn’t know how to bridge it. *I wish— Oh crap, is it eleven already?*

“…tuned for Night Owls,” the radio announcer was saying.

I should go to bed, she thought, completely failing to move from her desk. *But eleven isn’t that late, even on a school night, and I want to get a bit more done on this project. Anyway, I want to listen.* Not to mention the fact that she was feeling too restless to sleep right now.

"Good evening Sheffield. You're tuned to Hallam FM and this is Night Owls with me, Roger Kirk. What's on your mind?" He paused for a moment, presumably for effect, and Rosa tried in vain to stop her thoughts rushing in to fill the gap. "To kick us off, did any of you watch Panorama tonight? Fascinating retrospective on the history of parahumans; capes, in common parlance. A decade ago, the golden man first appeared above the ocean. Five years ago, capes announced themselves to the world. Three years ago, the death of Vikare, AKA Andrew Hawke, showed us that they were just people. Now, the UK has its own official cape teams, most notably the King's Men, and we've just heard that the police are creating a new specialist operations unit to focus on parahuman-related crime. Is that a step too far? Not far enough? Tell me what you think." Another brief pause. "Looks like we have our first caller, and it's one of our regulars: Mary, in Attercliffe. How are you doing, Mary?"

"I don't believe in these so-called capes."

"That's a bold statement. Care to unpack it a little?"

"They don't exist. It's all special effects and lies made up to distract us from what's really going on."

"Mary, I've met Sheffield Steel in person. I've shaken his hand. I watched him lift a car over his head."

"Like I said: special effects and lies. The car was probably on wires."

They went back and forth a little, but Mary remained unconvinced. Not that Rosa was surprised. *She doesn't believe in the moon. Of course she doesn't believe in capes.* Mary wouldn't even say what she thought capes were supposed to be a distraction from, outside of some dark mutterings about conspiracies and hidden puppet masters. Rosa was half disappointed, half relieved when Roger deftly moved onto the next caller.

"Of course capes are real," John in Parson Cross, scoffed. "Only a right daft apeth'd think they weren't. Anyway, I wanted to talk about what happened down Hole in the Road the other week."

Rosa's hand twitched, sending her pen skidding across the page. Frowning, she set the pen aside and reached for the Tippex bottle. On the radio, Roger was asking John-in-Parson-Cross to explain for the benefit of the listeners.

"The cape fight, of course," John said impatiently. "Made a right mess. The C&A entrance looked like a bomb'd hit it. Bloody vandals."

"It wasn't her fault," Rosa muttered, as if the voices on the radio could hear her. "She didn't mean to." And yet doubt wound its treacherous coils around her thoughts, whispering to her with a forked tongue. *I wasn't there. And she won't tell me what happened. She won't talk to me at all. So maybe… Maybe…* Blindly setting the Tippex bottle down, Rosa sagged in her seat, pressing the heels of her hands against her eyes as if that would stop the burning. *I don't know what to do.*

After a restless night's sleep, Rosa awoke still bereft of inspiration, and she stumbled through the day with gritty eyes and too-tight skin, trying not to think the thought that kept popping up again and again and again in her mind. *I wish she'd never—*

“Rosa, did you hear me?”

Rosa jumped a little, narrowly managing not to spill the bundle of cutlery in her hands, giving her mum a sheepish grin. “Sorry, I was thinking. What did you say?”

“When you’ve finished setting the table, tell Samir and your dad that dinner’s ready.”

“Sure.”

By the time she’d dragged her gremlin of a brother away from his game — she’d had to threaten to pull the plug on his SNES before he finally shifted his arse — the table was practically groaning under the weight of all the food piled on it. *One of these days, Mum will figure out that she doesn’t have to make enough to feed an army*. Today, however, was definitely not that day.

“Couscous?” Samir said as he plonked himself down at the table, pulling a disgusted face. “I wanted fish fingers.”

“If you don’t like my cooking, you know where the kitchen is,” Mum said tartly.

“Are you sure about that?” Rosa muttered, grinning at Samir when he pulled a face at her. He kicked her under the table. She kicked him back.

“Will you two behave?” Mum said, sighing loudly, giving Rosa a look that always made her feel about an inch tall, even though she was now the taller of the two. “You especially, Rosa. You’re old enough to know better.”

“Yeah, Rosa.” Samir drew the words out, grinning from ear to ear. “You should know better.”

“I know you’re asking for a slap!”

“Rosa! That’s enough.”

It’s not fair. Why do I have to be the responsible one? He’s not that much younger than me. “Sorry, Mum.”

“Let’s eat,” Dad pronounced, reaching for the plate of semolina bread.

That was the cue for everyone to start filling their plates, passing bowls and serving spoons in an easy, familiar rhythm. There was a moment of stillness as they made their du’a — Rosa may have hurried through the words, because the food smelled so good and she was really hungry all of a sudden, but they were no less sincere for their speed, and anyway that was between her and Allah — and then they could finally dig in.

“What are you looking so mardy about?” Samir asked, jolting her out of her thoughts.

“I’m not mardy. I’m just thinking.”

“What about?”

“None of your beeswax.”

Rather than snapping back at her though, Samir frowned, chewing thoughtfully on a mouthful of food before swallowing and saying, “You okay? You seem a bit down in the dumps.”

My best friend is avoiding me and I don’t know why. But she really didn’t want to get into that right now, so she forced a sly smile to her lips and a teasing note in her voice to say, “Don’t let Mum hear you call the house a dump.”

“You know that’s not what I meant,” he retorted. They bickered back and forth for a while, subsiding when Mum gave them the beady eye. “Oh, there was something I wanted to ask you.”

“What?”

“Has Malika picked a code name yet? If not, she should really get a wriggle on so she doesn’t get stuck with something lame. Remember Ecky Thump? No one wants to be the next Ecky Thump.”

“How the hell would I know?” Rosa muttered, staring down at her plate to cover up whatever might have been showing in her eyes.

“She’s your friend, isn’t she?” Samir persisted, apparently oblivious to his sister’s inner turmoil. “She must’ve said something.”

“Well, she hasn’t. I didn’t even know she’d got powers until I heard it through the grapevine.” *Even though she promised.* They both had, back when they first realised that heroes were just people; that anyone could become a cape. *If I got powers, I’d tell her.*

Samir started to say something else, but Dad cut him off, saying sternly, “We shouldn’t be talking about this.”

“What? It’s not like it’s a secret. Everyone and their dog knows she’s a cape. Even Auntie Selma knows, and she’s half deaf!”

“People in our community know,” Dad corrected him seriously. “And we need to keep it that way. Malika is the first openly hijabi cape in the North. There are people who don’t like that. First and foremost, we need to keep her safe. And we do that by keeping quiet. Do you understand?”

“Yeah but not when we’re at home.” Samir’s frustration was clear in his voice. “It’s not like I’m yelling it in the street.”

“The more you practise discretion, the easier it becomes.”

“I guess,” Samir muttered, sounding unconvinced.

“She’d be safer if she didn’t make a thing of being Muslim,” Mum said suddenly. “She can dress modestly without wearing a headscarf. Like you said, people are going to get riled up, so why bring that on herself?” She shook her head, her expression troubled. “Her poor parents must be worried sick.”

Rosa wondered if she was thinking about the things people had called her when they saw her scarf; about the time some snotty toe-rag of a kid had pulled it right off her head. And for the first time since Mal had started freezing her out, the knot of barbed wire in her chest uncoiled enough for wonder and even pride to shine through.

"That's why it's important," she said softly. "Things don't change unless someone makes them change. What she's doing is hard, and… and dangerous" —her mouth went dry, and she had to swallow before she could continue— "but it's really brave. And because she's standing up now, it'll be easier for the next one to do the same." Suddenly self-conscious, she dropped her gaze to her plate. "That's what I think, anyway," she muttered.

She found herself coming back to that thought over the next few days; prodding at it like a tongue poking at a loose tooth. *Was it her idea to do this?* she wondered. Like Rosa, Mal only wore her hijab at the mosque. But putting it on to make a statement? That was definitely something she'd do. *Still doesn't explain why she won't talk to me, though.* And that brought her right back to the thing that was currently tying her stomach up in knots. *Should I try to talk to her about it tonight?*

"None of my friends have to go to school in the evening," Samir was complaining when she got downstairs, just like he did every week. "Why do I have to learn Arabic anyway? We live in England, and everyone in Algeria speaks French."

"Arabic is the language of the Qur'an," Dad said, like he did every time, vaguely looking around the hallway until Mum rolled her eyes and picked up the car keys from the telephone table, putting them in his hand.

"That's what translations are for."

"It's better in the original Arabic. Anyway, it's a beautiful language."

Samir continued to complain, but Rosa quickly tuned him out, too focused on what, if anything, she was going to say to Mal. He was probably still complaining when they parted ways to go to their respective classrooms. But no inspiration came, and then Mal was right there, surrounded by the gaggle of girls who'd attached themselves to her after… After. One of them was sitting in Rosa's usual seat, and for a brief moment she thought about saying something, but in the end her courage failed her and she turned away.

"Rosa, hi!"

Mal's voice stopped her in her tracks, and she had to take a moment to compose herself before she replied. "Hi." She was instantly consumed by mortification at how stiff she sounded.

Mal started to say something, but then turned to the girl in Rosa's seat and said, "Hey Fatima, would you mind scooching over for Rosa? Thanks!"

Fatima obligingly moved to another desk — although she shot Rosa a sour look as they awkwardly danced around each other in the narrow aisle — and Rosa cautiously settled herself into the newly-vacated seat. Mal was looking at her with an expression she couldn't read, and she cast about for

something, anything to break the tension, only to be spared the necessity when the teacher hurried in and started the class.

She didn't have the first clue whether she was relieved or disappointed.

By the time the mid-lesson break rolled around, her shoulders were so tense they were up by her ears. As soon as the teacher gave them leave, the class departed en masse to make a beeline for the school's lone vending machine — still one more than Rosa's normal school had — to avail themselves of whatever treats the day classes had left behind. Mal seemed to hesitate, and Rosa's heart leapt into her suddenly dry throat… but then one of the other girls called to Mal and she turned to join them.

Rosa lingered in the classroom for a few moments, trying to catch her breath, but then it occurred to her that Mal might think she was avoiding her, and the white-hot flare of panic sent her scurrying to catch up. As she rounded the final corner, her shoes slipped on the polished vinyl floor and she skidded to a stop, desperately flailing her arms in an attempt not to go arse over apex. Narrowly managing to keep her balance, she cringed in anticipation of the others girls' laughter, relief filling her when she realised none of them had so much as looked her way. A moment later, that relief curdled into unease as she realised the reason no one had noticed was because they were crowding around Mal, their attention focused firmly on her.

"Go on," Zainab was saying, her tone wheedling. "It doesn't have to be anything big."

"Yeah," Maya added eagerly. "Just" —she wiggled her fingers— "do your thing."

"I…" Mal glanced around, a deer-in-headlights expression written across her face. "I don't… I can't…"

"Pleeeeease?" Lilia that time, looking at Mal with big, hopeful eyes. "It's just us here. No one else is going to see."

The chorus continued, voices overlapping into a meaningless babble and Mal shrank back before the weight of it, her gaze flicking around with increasing desperation. It lit upon Rosa, and the shock of that contact was enough to snap Rosa out of her paralysis.

"Leave her alone!" she didn't quite shout, feeling a thrill of satisfaction as several of the girls jumped, jerking their heads around towards her so fast they were in danger of giving themselves whiplash. "What's wrong with you?"

Protests rose from them like a wave, cut off when Mal abruptly sprang into motion, shoving her way through the small crowd and running for the loos. A beat later — after one last fierce glare warning of the dire consequences should any of the other girls follow — Rosa hurried after her.

"Mal?" she called softly as the door swung closed behind her. "Malika? Are you okay?" What a stupid question, she castigated herself, cringing inside when Mal hiccoughed out a laugh that was closer to a sob.

"I am so bloody far from okay right now."

The pain in her voice almost brought tears to Rosa's eyes, and she had to swallow before she could ask, "Want to talk about it?"

A beat's silence, and then, "I don't know."

"If you want to, I'm here. And if you don't want to, that's okay. I'm still here. I'm always here for you, Mal. You're my best friend." Rosa's voice cracked despite her best efforts, but she forced herself to keep going. "And if you want me to leave, just say the—"

The cubicle door slammed open to reveal Mal staring at her with wide, distressed eyes. "Don't go," she blurted out, surging forward to wrap her arms around Rosa so tightly that Rosa couldn't stop herself from yelping. "Sorry," Mal muttered, loosening her grip enough that Rosa could breathe. "I just… Keeping my distance has been killing me, and it was all for nothing in the end anyway. I couldn't… couldn't stand it if I lost you, not on top of everything else, so please… I know I've been an awful friend, Rosa, but please, please don't leave me."

"I won't," Rosa promised and, despite everything, it still felt like the most natural thing in the world to wrap her arms tightly around Mal. "We promised, remember? Best friends for life."

"Best friends for life," Mal echoed, and if there was an odd note in her voice, Rosa wasn't going to risk everything to look that gift horse in the mouth; not when she finally had her friend back. "I'm sorry I shut you out."

"That's okay." It wasn't, but that sliver of hurt was buried too deep in relief to cut right now. Still, despite her resolve to just accept this good fortune, Rosa couldn't stop herself from asking, "But why did you?"

Mal heaved a great, shuddering sigh. "Getting powers… it's not anything like we thought it would be, Rosa. It's… It was awful. And everybody knows I have them and everybody wants to know absolutely every little detail of how it happened and I can lie to them, but I can't lie to you. I can never lie to you, Rosa."

"You wouldn't have to," Rosa said softly, her heart breaking in two. "If you didn't want to talk about it all you had to do is say that. The last thing I want is to make you feel bad."

"No, I know, I—" Breaking off, Mal stepped back. Rosa instantly dropped the embrace, but Mal put her hands on Rosa's shoulders, looking into her eyes. "The thing is, I wanted to talk to you. I wanted to so much. But I was afraid that if I did, if told anyone at all, then I'd lose it completely. And I can't afford to fall apart, not with so many eyes on me." She let out a sharp, humourless laugh. "I'm the first hijabi cape in the North. I have to set an example." Her voice cracked on the last word, and Rosa felt tears gathering at the corners of her eyes.

"I don't care that you're the first," Rosa said fiercely, her voice thick with all the emotions churning inside her. "I don't even care that you're a cape." She was surprised to realise that was true. "I just care about you. And if you need to fall apart, then you can fall apart with me. I'll help you put yourself back together again, and if anyone — anyone at all — says anything to you, then they'll have me to deal with!"

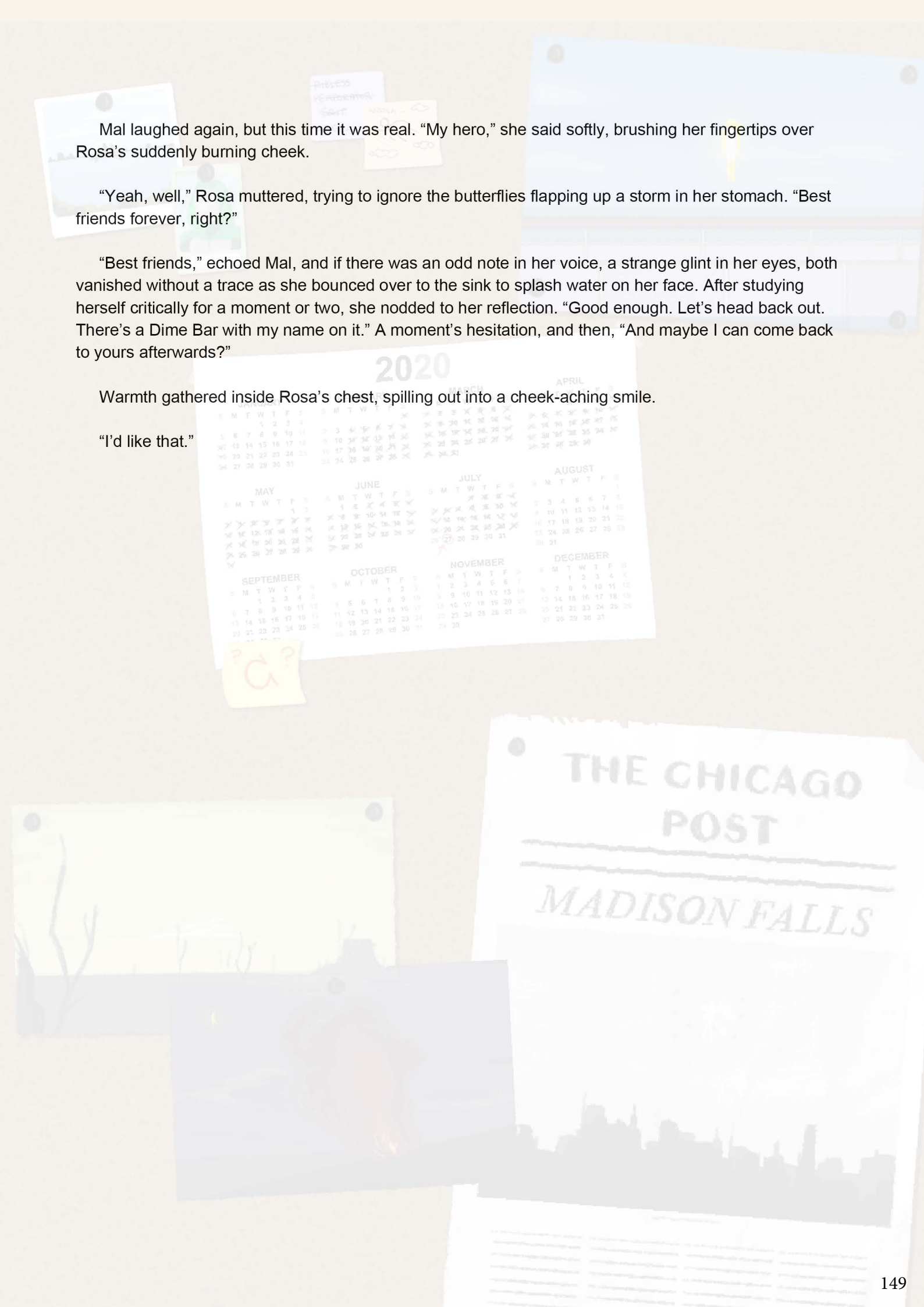
Mal laughed again, but this time it was real. “My hero,” she said softly, brushing her fingertips over Rosa’s suddenly burning cheek.

“Yeah, well,” Rosa muttered, trying to ignore the butterflies flapping up a storm in her stomach. “Best friends forever, right?”

“Best friends,” echoed Mal, and if there was an odd note in her voice, a strange glint in her eyes, both vanished without a trace as she bounced over to the sink to splash water on her face. After studying herself critically for a moment or two, she nodded to her reflection. “Good enough. Let’s head back out. There’s a Dime Bar with my name on it.” A moment’s hesitation, and then, “And maybe I can come back to yours afterwards?”

Warmth gathered inside Rosa’s chest, spilling out into a cheek-aching smile.

“I’d like that.”



P.H.Q.
yeah, you could say I'm a Rime fan!

!!! Protectorate Pals Reviws !!!
by EiDoLoNfAn1997 - Saturday, 15 June 2008, 12:43 PM

I read a review in the newspaper and it said Protectorate Pals is bad so I am making new reviews to show that its good instead. I am learning about how to write essays so I can make a good review. For example we should not use contractions in essays because they are not formal.

Season One of Protectorate Pals is very good because all the heroes are very strong. They are never scared and fix all their problems right away. For instance, Alexandria is able to stop the bank robbers when they hide in the vault because she is able to pull the door off. Eidolon is also very good at using his powers because he can always find one that helps them. This makes it good because the heroes always win like they should. In real life they always do that, so it makes sense for it to be in the show.

Another good part is when it looks like Legend got hit by the super ray but he actually had a Tinker invention from Armsmaster that used it to make his own lasers better. It was a good twist because it was a secret. That way you could not guess before it happened and spoil it.

I forgot about the other part I liked so I will write about it when I get the DVD.

Stars: 5 stars because it is good and Harriet Jepsen in the St Louis Post Dispatch is wrong about it not being good. She said it was cliche and that is not right because cliche means you did it too much and this is only the first season so how can you do it too much?

!!! Protectorate Pal sReviews 2 !!!!
by EiDoLoNfAn1997 - Saturday, 11 October 2008, 3:59 PM

I am writing more reviews of Protecorate Pals because of the Season Two Finale yesterday and I liked it. I watched it with my friend Nyera and we liked it a lot so she is helping me write it. My dad was also watching but he fell asleep so he is not helping because he is still asleep.

We liked the part with the villain twins (Hornet Girl and Wasp Man) because they were funny and not scary like the big evil sword guy. I wanted to be Hornet Girl for Halloween but Nyera called dibs so I am going to be Eidolon because he is also cool and I do not want to be Wasp Man.

We also liked the part where they used the team attacks because they have cool names. We made up some team attacks too, except we had to wait to do the ones with three people because it was just Nyera and me.

!! Protectorate Pals Reviews 3 !!!
by EiDoLoNfAn1997 - Saturday, 24 January 2009, 11:30 AM

This season was good because of the themes. I learned about themes, and that they are very important in stories, this year. This season had themes like friendship and bravery, like when Eidolon was trying to solve the problems on his own and learned he needed help from his friends. I think he could probably do it on his own anyway but it is still a good lesson.

Eidolon is my favorite hero and there were a lot of episodes about him. I liked them the most because it showed a lot of different powers that he can do. If I was a hero I would want a power like his.

My dad is going to Texas for work in the summer and he said he would meet him at one of their events and ask him to sign my poster! I have to pick which one but he said it will be okay because I have several months to decide, and I might get a new one soon too.

!!!Protectorate Pals Reviews Season 4!!!
by EiDoLoNfAn1997 - Saturday, 2 May 2009, 5:05 PM

Doctor Hawyire is really bad and it was good because now they have an antagonist to fight. Antagonists are very important in stories too. That is why he was able to get away at the end of the season, so he could be an antagonist for more of the show. He has a lot of tools and he broke more villains out of jail, which means he can give them his tools so they are harder to fight.

Eidolon was really good this season because he figured out how to make his powers stronger. It is not very similar to the real Eidolon because he is very strong already but it was still cool. I liked when he was able to stop the bad guys from breaking into the Bird Cage by making a second Bird Cage and tricking them into going into that one. It was smart because he tricked them into going to jail and did not even have to arrest them first like normal.

I have decided I am going to get my special poster signed that I got for my birthday. I have a picture of it right here*[Uh oh! Broken link. Please report to a system administrator. 500 Internal Server Error]* and you can also see my other poster in the back.

Protectorate Pals Reviews (5-7)
by EiDoLoNfAn1997 - Sunday, 30 May 2010, 10:22 PM

(Continuing from my old posts here) Seasons 5-7 of Protectorate Pals change things up a lot. The seasons before these showed them as almost invincible. However, these seasons are much darker, because sometimes the Triumvirate loses. There is even an episode where they get captured and the other heroes have to save them from Faker. I think the show has new writers who understand how to tell good stories. Good stories need the heroes to lose sometimes, because it is more real that way. In real life sometimes the heroes lose or do not do their jobs right and people get hurt. They cannot solve everything on their own.

I think this was shown in the final episode, when all the people stood up for the heroes and protected them. They were trapped in the power-draining bubble and could not fight back, so the people in New York City protected them instead. There was strong imagery in the scene. The show usually makes Alexandria look tall because she flies above people all the time. However, in this scene, she was the one looking up, because the power-draining bubble made it so she could not stand. She saw the people standing over her and protecting her and it was a parallel to the way other people saw her standing over them and protecting them instead.

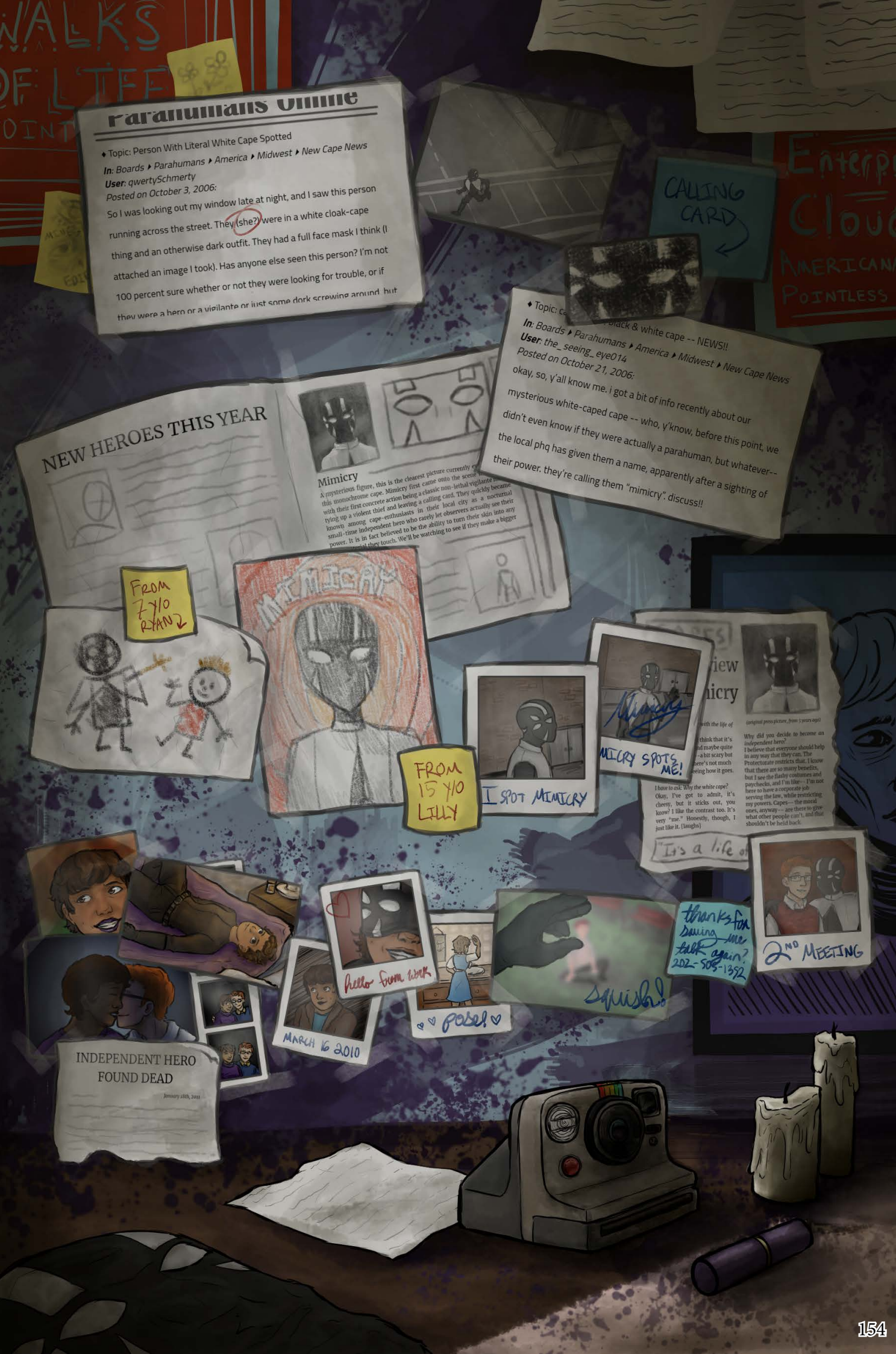
I think about that part a lot. My dad met a lot of heroes for his job. He said he helped protect them, just in the court room instead of in a fight. But he never got a hero protecting him.

Protectorate Pals Reviews (8/final)
by EiDoLoNfAn1997 - Saturday, 19 June 2010, 1:01 PM

I did not write any reviews for a year because I did not want to watch the show. My mom said not to talk about myself on the internet any more so I will not be very specific. The new seasons were very realistic because of what I said. Sometimes the Protectorate loses, or they try their best and innocent people still get hurt or even die, even though they can't show that on TV. I think everybody has to learn that and it is good to learn it from a show instead of in real life first.

Even though it is still going to continue, season 8 of Protectorate Pals would have been a good ending. All the heroes learned how to be better at being heroes. They learned that their best would not always be good enough. A lot of normal people knew that already. It is good that the heroes know now too.

I am going to stop writing these, because it makes me sad sometimes. I like watching it without thinking about themes and things like that. Thank you for reading.


Parahumans Online
♦ Topic: Person With Literal White Cape Spotted
In: Boards ▸ Parahumans ▸ America ▸ Midwest ▸ New Cape News
User: qwertySchmerty
Posted on October 3, 2006:
So I was looking out my window late at night, and I saw this person running across the street. They (she?) were in a white cloak-cape thing and an otherwise dark outfit. They had a full face mask I think (I attached an image I took). Has anyone else seen this person? I'm not 100 percent sure whether or not they were looking for trouble, or if they were a hero or a vigilante or just some dork screwing around, but
CALLING CARD
♦ Topic: c... black & white cape -- NEWS!!
In: Boards ▸ Parahumans ▸ America ▸ Midwest ▸ New Cape News
User: the_ seeing_ eye014
Posted on October 21, 2006:
okay, so, y'all know me. i got a bit of info recently about our mysterious white-caped cape -- who, y'know, before this point, we didn't even know if they were actually a parahuman, but whatever-- the local phq has given them a name, apparently after a sighting of their power. they're calling them "mimicry". discuss!!
NEW HEROES THIS YEAR
Mimicry
A mysterious figure, this is the clearest picture currently ex... this monochrome cape. Mimicry first came onto the scene ... with their first concrete action being a classic non-lethal vigilante ... tying up a violent thief and leaving a calling card. They quickly became known among cape-enthusiasts in their local city as a nocturnal small-time independent hero who rarely let observers actually see their power. It is in fact believed to be the ability to turn their skin into any ...erial they touch. We'll be watching to see if they make a bigger
FROM 7 Y/O RYAN 2
MIMICRY
FROM 15 Y/O LILLY
I SPOT MIMICRY
MICRY SPOTS ME!
...iew ...icry
(original press picture, from 3 years ago)
...with the life of ... think that it's ...nd maybe quite ...-a bit scary but ...here's not much ...eeing how it goes.
Why did you decide to become an independent hero?
I believe that everyone should help in any way that they can. The Protectorate restricts that. I know that there are so many benefits, but I see the flashy costumes and paychecks, and I'm like— I'm not here to have a corporate job serving the law, while restricting my powers. Capes— the moral ones, anyway — are there to give what other people can't, and that shouldn't be held back.
I have to ask: Why the white cape?
Okay, I've got to admit, it's cheesy, but it sticks out, you know? I like the contrast too. It's very "me." Honestly, though, I just like it. (laughs)
"It's a life of
thanks for saving me talk again? 202-555-1352
2ND MEETING
Hello from work
pose!
squish!
MARCH 16 2010
INDEPENDENT HERO FOUND DEAD
January 18th, 2011

On the Death of Jet Leopard

This is an open letter to those grieving, even if they may not feel the right to grieve.

I cannot say I was close to the man. In addition to living in entirely different parts of the country, our careers *were* and *are now* at dramatically different points. He had already made a name for himself (insofar as independent capes can make names for themselves) while I was just learning the ropes of using my own abilities. By the time I managed to earn a PRT-recognized moniker he had already become a much more public figure, officially endorsing and endorsed-by the Protectorate while having contracts with multiple Fortune 500 companies, all without compromising his fundamentally decent code of ethics. He fought Behemoth in New York, lived to tell the tale, then went back for more time and time again, all without demanding that others step up with him.

This, of course, was why I volunteered to fight in Jakarta, and why so many others did as well.

I don't think anyone expected for Jet Leopard to die of something as simple as a hit-and-run. We superheroes, as a whole, operate in the mortality-ambiguous zone of masked adventuring, such that if someone gets shot in the gut and then bleeds out in the night, it's entirely possible that their persona's disappearance will go completely unremarked upon, or ascribed to retirement, or any other number of reasons that don't involve decomposition. No one expects a person who can dodge bullets to perish *period*, and especially not of a malady so decidedly mundane in nature as an unlucky street crossing. Yet the plaque in LA's city hall that bears his insignia is undeniably the result of an anonymous car crashing into an unmasked man, with no possible suspects to name. As requested in Elijah Crowwood's will, his identity was

revealed after his death, his assets liquidated, and the resulting sum split evenly between a few distant relatives (he bore no children, nor had living siblings) and a number of community outreach programs.

I have been told the process took no longer than a week, a disorientingly tidy accounting of a decidedly extraordinary man.

I do not know how to react to this particular funeral. On an intellectual level, I am aware that heroes *can* die. Vikare proved that. Many even die in the United States, and of the ones that die in the United States, most die anonymously. It is different, however, to see in the morning paper that a man you *idolized*, idolized for the sole reason that he was someone *other* who still stood with the white giants of the industry, idolized for remaining dignified and humble in the face of fame and power, and had then earned acclaim to rival his pale peers. Yes, there are other well-known black heroes, like Eight-Eyes in Louisiana, Wheelman in San Francisco, and Mixtape in Chicago, but none who towered so unforgettably in the public eye like Jet Leopard did.

But now he is dead, and the seats of Olympus are once again entirely white.

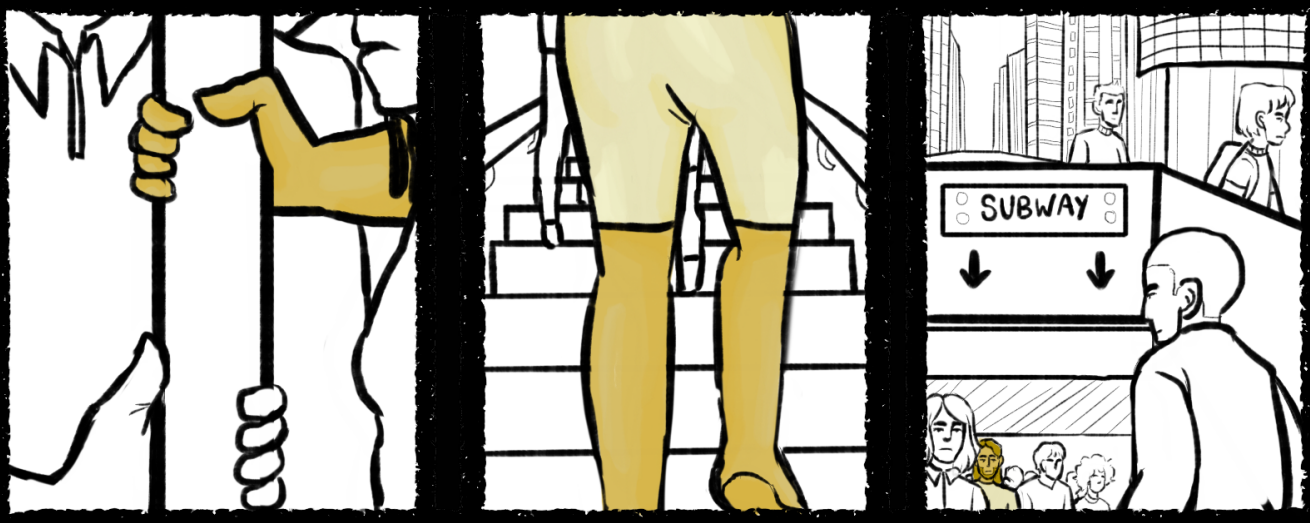
I do not mean to indict those working for a better, safer world, who happen to be white. I do not mean that those who are white-passing are free from suffering. I do not mean that anyone who chooses to put on a mask and try to make the world a safer place act with anything less than a genuine desire to see wrongs made rights and evil undone. I merely establish that there is a sort of knowledge which can only be gained while grasping the steering wheel as tightly as you can and praying to God that you survive to see your mother again, and that not all experiences humans have are universal.

As of now there is no one among the Protectorate or Protectorate-associated heroes at a high level who has lived experience as part of a black community. That is a problem.

In this moment of grief, I encourage the reader to also look forward, at what might be for the lack of this amazing man. I request that we begin opening dialogues across the legal/extralegal line, that we address the fact that one mighty black superhero does not undo several centuries of racial injustice on his own, and that there is still work to be done. I hope that those reading this, particularly those with power (whether that be economic, political, social, or parahuman) will take the time to wonder how we might live out this man's legacy in our everyday lives. I request that we remember that Jet Leopard fought not only Behemoth but also poverty, corruption, and discrimination in all its varied forms.

Evil takes many forms, and much of it can be fought without a supersuit.

This piece was written by The Might Pigeon, an independent hero operating in San Diego. He is assisted by Longshot and in good standing with the local branch of the Protectorate.


SUBWAY

NYC DO
HOT D

This zine is and was a non-profit volunteer
driven project made by fans, for fans.
Find Worm the web serial at
https://parahumans.wordpress.com/

Worm © Wildbow

THANK YOU ♥
-nil